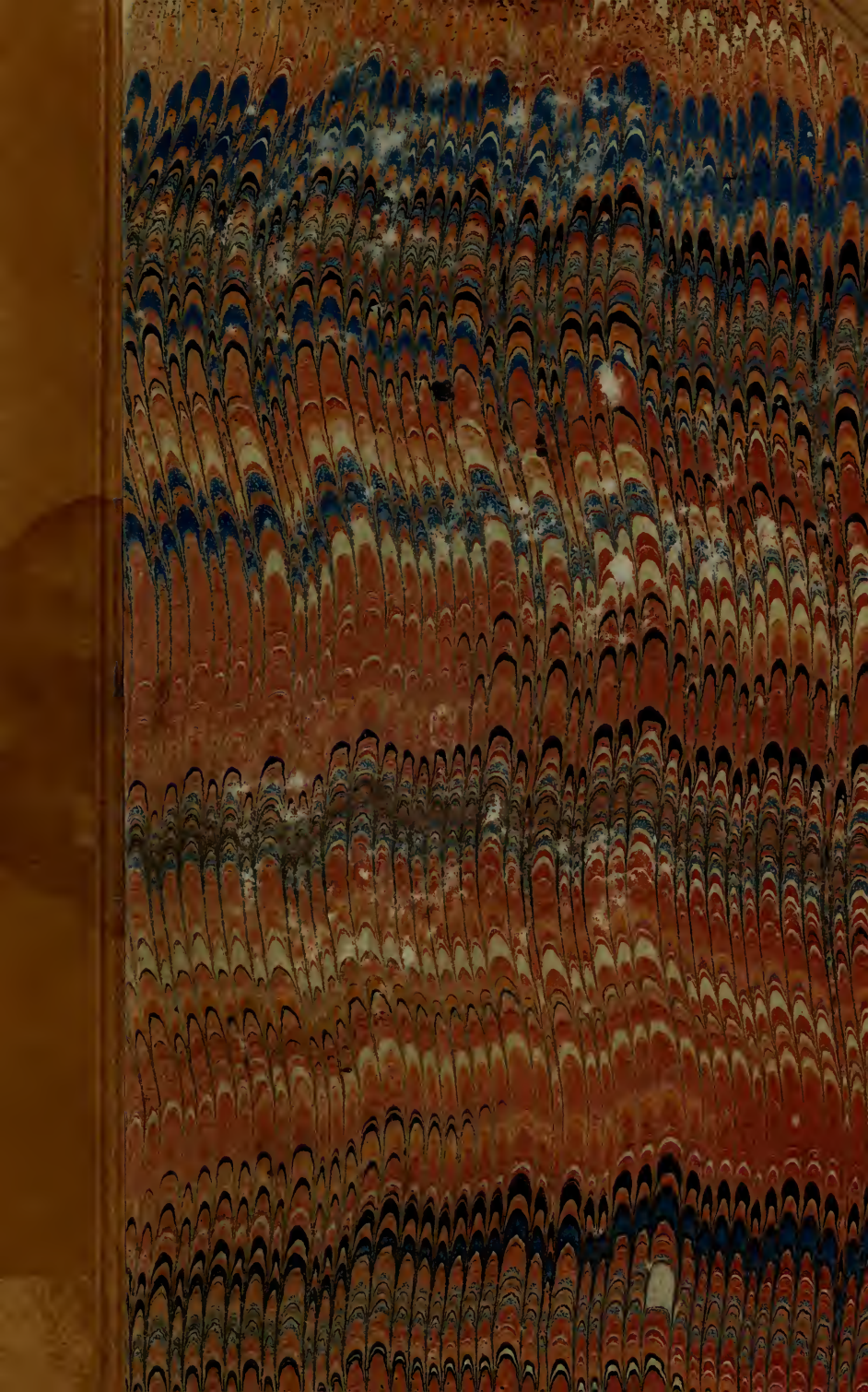

LIBRARY
Brigham Young University

Nicholas Nickleby

G86
V.6

WORKS

OF

CHARLES DICKENS.

HOUSEHOLD EDITION.

ILLUSTRATED FROM DRAWINGS BY F. O. C. DARLEY AND JOHN GILBERT.

NICHOLAS NICKLEBY.

VOL. IV.

NEW YORK:
W. A. TOWNSEND AND COMPANY.
46 WALKER STREET.
1861.

Entered according to Act of Congress, in the year 1861, by

W. A. Townsend and Company,

in the Clerk's Office of the District Court for the Southern District of New York.

RIVERSIDE, CAMBRIDGE:

STEREOTYPED AND PRINTED BY H. O. HOUGHTON.

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY
LIBRARY
PROVO, UTAH

THE LIFE AND ADVENTURES

OF

NICHOLAS NICKLEBY.

CONTENTS OF VOLUME IV.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

PAGE

Being for the Benefit of Mr. Vincent Crummles, and Positively his last Appearance on this Stage 9

CHAPTER XLIX.

Chronicles the further Proceedings of the Nickleby Family, and the Sequel of the Adventure of the Gentleman in the Small-Clothes 26

CHAPTER L.

Involves a serious Catastrophe 49

CHAPTER LI.

The project of Mr. Ralph Nickleby and his Friend approaching a successful Issue, becomes unexpectedly known to another Party, not admitted into their Confidence 69

CHAPTER LII.

Nicholas despairs of rescuing Madeline Bray, but plucks up his spirits again, and determines to attempt it. Domestic Intelligence of the Kenwigses and Lillyvicks 86

CHAPTER LIII.

Containing the further Progress of the Plot contrived by Mr. Ralph Nickleby and Mr. Arthur Gride 105

CHAPTER LIV.

PAGE

The Crisis of the Project, and its Result 129

CHAPTER LV.

Of Family matters, Cares, Hopes, Disappointments, and Sorrows 146

CHAPTER LVI.

Ralph Nickleby, baffled by his Nephew in his late Design, hatches a scheme of Retaliation which accident suggests to him, and takes into his Counsels a tried Auxiliary . . 164

CHAPTER LVII.

How Ralph Nickleby's Auxiliary went about his work, and how he prospered with it 183

CHAPTER LVIII.

In which one Scene of this History is closed 199

CHAPTER LIX.

The Plots begin to fail, and Doubts and Dangers to disturb the Plotter 208

CHAPTER LX.

The Dangers thicken, and the Worst is told 230

CHAPTER LXI.

Wherein Nicholas and his Sister forfeit the Good Opinion of all worldly and prudent People 247

CHAPTER LXII.

Ralph makes one last Appointment — and keeps it . . . 262

CHAPTER LXIII.

PAGE
The Brothers Cheeryble make various Declarations for themselves and others. Tim Linkinwater makes a Declaration for himself 271

CHAPTER LXIV.

An old Acquaintance is Recognized under melancholy Circumstances, and Dotheboys Hall breaks up forever . . . 287

CHAPTER LXV.

Conclusion 301

LIFE AND ADVENTURES

OF

NICHOLAS NICKLEBY.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

BEING FOR THE BENEFIT OF MR. VINCENT CRUMMLES, AND POSITIVELY HIS LAST APPEARANCE ON THIS STAGE.

It was with a very sad and heavy heart, oppressed by many painful ideas, that Nicholas retraced his steps eastward and betook himself to the counting-house of Cheeryble Brothers. Whatever the idle hopes he had suffered himself to entertain, whatever the pleasant visions which had sprung up in his mind and grouped themselves round the fair image of Madeline Bray, they were now dispelled, and not a vestige of their gayety and brightness remained.

It would be a poor compliment to Nicholas's better nature, and one which he was very far from deserving, to insinuate that the solution, and such a solution, of the mystery which had seemed to surround Madeline Bray, when he was ignorant even of her name, had damped his ardor or cooled the fervor of his admiration. If he had regarded her before, with such a passion as young men attracted by mere beauty and elegance may

entertain, he was now conscious of much deeper and stronger feelings. But, reverence for the truth and purity of her heart, respect for the helplessness and loneliness of her situation, sympathy with the trials of one so young and fair, and admiration of her great and noble spirit, all seemed to raise her far above his reach, and, while they imparted new depth and dignity to his love, to whisper that it was hopeless.

"I will keep my word as I have pledged it to her." said Nicholas, manfully. "This is no common trust that I have to discharge, and I will perform the double duty that is imposed upon me most scrupulously and strictly. My secret feelings deserve no consideration in such a case as this, and they shall have none."

Still, there were the secret feelings in existence just the same, and in secret Nicholas rather encouraged them than otherwise; reasoning (if he reasoned at all) that there they could do no harm to anybody but himself, and that if he kept them to himself from a sense of duty, he had an additional right to entertain himself with them as a reward for his heroism.

All these thoughts, coupled with what he had seen that morning and the anticipation of his next visit, rendered him a very dull and abstracted companion; so much so, indeed, that Tim Linkinwater suspected he must have made the mistake of a figure somewhere, which was preying upon his mind, and seriously conjured him, if such were the case, to make a clean breast and scratch it out, rather than have his whole life imbittered by the tortures of remorse.

But in reply to these considerate representations, and many others both from Tim and Mr. Frank, Nicholas could only be brought to state that he was never merrier

in his life; and so went on all day, and so went towards home at night, still turning over and over again the same subjects, thinking over and over again the same things, and arriving over and over again at the same conclusions.

In this pensive, wayward, and uncertain state, people are apt to lounge and loiter without knowing why, to read placards on the walls with great attention and without the smallest idea of one word of their contents, and to stare most earnestly through shop-windows at things which they don't see. It was thus that Nicholas found himself poring with the utmost interest over a large play-bill hanging outside a Minor Theatre which he had to pass on his way home, and reading a list of the actors and actresses who had promised to do honor to some approaching benefit, with as much gravity as if it had been a catalogue of the names of those ladies and gentlemen who stood highest upon the Book of Fate, and he had been looking anxiously for his own. He glanced at the top of the bill, with a smile at his own dulness, as he prepared to resume his walk, and there saw announced, in large letters with a large space between each of them, "Positively the last appearance of Mr. Vincent Crummles of Provincial Celebrity!!!"

"Nonsense!" said Nicholas, turning back again. "It can't be."

But there it was. In one line by itself was an announcement of the first night of a new melodrama; in another line by itself was an announcement of the last six nights of an old one; a third line was devoted to the reëngagement of the unrivalled African Knife-swallower, who had kindly suffered himself to be prevailed upon to forego his country engagements for one week

longer; a fourth line announced that Mr. Snittle Timberry, having recovered from his late severe indisposition, would have the honor of appearing that evening; a fifth line said that there were "Cheers, Tears, and Laughter!" every night; a sixth, that that was positively the last appearance of Mr. Vincent Crummles of Provincial Celebrity.

"Surely it must be the same man," thought Nicholas. "There can't be two Vincent Crummleses."

The better to settle this question he referred to the bill again, and finding that there was a Baron in the first piece, and that Roberto (his son) was enacted by one Master Crummles, and Spaletro (his nephew) by one Master Percy Crummles — *their* last appearances — and that, incidental to the piece, was a characteristic dance by the characters, and a castanet pas seul by the Infant Phenomenon — *her* last appearance — he no longer entertained any doubt; and presenting himself at the stage door, and sending in a scrap of paper with "Mr. Johnson" written thereon in pencil, was presently conducted by a Robber, with a very large belt and buckle round his waist, and very large leather gauntlets on his hands, into the presence of his former manager.

Mr. Crummles was unfeignedly glad to see him, and starting up from before a small dressing-glass, with one very bushy eyebrow stuck on crooked over his left eye, and the fellow eyebrow and the calf of one of his legs in his hand, embraced him cordially; at the same time observing, that it would do Mrs. Crummles's heart good to bid him good-by before they went.

"You were always a favorite of hers, Johnson," said Crummles, "always were from the first. I was quite easy in my mind about you from that first day you dined

with us. One that Mrs. Crummles took a fancy to, was sure to turn out right. Ah! Johnson, what a woman that is!"

"I am sincerely obliged to her for her kindness in this and all other respects," said Nicholas. "But where are you going, that you talk about bidding good-by?"

"Haven't you seen it in the papers?" said Crummles, with some dignity.

"No," replied Nicholas.

"I wonder at that," said the manager. "It was among the varieties. I had the paragraph here somewhere — but I don't know — oh, yes, here it is."

So saying, Mr. Crummles, after pretending that he thought he must have lost it, produced a square inch of newspaper from the pocket of the pantaloons he wore in private life (which together with the plain clothes of several other gentlemen, lay scattered about on a kind of dresser in the room), and gave it to Nicholas to read:—

"The talented Vincent Crummles, long favorably known to fame as a country manager and actor of no ordinary pretensions, is about to cross the Atlantic on a histrionic expedition. Crummles is to be accompanied, we hear, by his lady and gifted family. We know no man superior to Crummles in his particular line of character, or one who, whether as a public or private individual, could carry with him the best wishes of a larger circle of friends. Crummles is certain to succeed."

"Here's another bit," said Mr. Crummles, handing over a still smaller scrap. "This is from the notices to correspondents, this one."

Nicholas read it aloud. "'Philo-Dramaticus. — Crummles, the country manager and actor, cannot be

more than forty-three, or forty-four years of age. Crummles is NOT a Prussian, having been born at Chelsea.' Humph!" said Nicholas, "that's an odd paragraph."

"Very," returned Crummles, scratching the side of his nose, and looking at Nicholas with an assumption of great unconcern. "I can't think who put these things in. *I* didn't."

Still keeping his eye on Nicholas, Mr. Crummles shook his head twice or thrice with profound gravity, and remarking, that he could not for the life of him imagine how the newspapers found out the things they did, folded up the extracts and put them in his pocket again.

"I am astonished to hear this news," said Nicholas. "Going to America! You had no such thing in contemplation when I was with you."

"No," replied Crummles, "I hadn't then. The fact is, that Mrs. Crummles — most extraordinary woman, Johnson" — here he broke off and whispered something in his ear.

"Oh!" said Nicholas, smiling. "The prospect of an addition to your family?"

"The seventh addition, Johnson," returned Mr. Crummles, solemnly. "I thought such a child as the Phenomenon must have been a closer; but it seems we are to have another. She is a very remarkable woman."

"I congratulate you," said Nicholas, "and I hope this may prove a phenomenon too."

"Why, it's pretty sure to be something uncommon, I suppose," rejoined Mr. Crummles. "The talent of the other three is principally in combat and serious pantomime. I should like this one to have a turn for juvenile tragedy; I understand they want something of that sort in America very much. However, we must take it as it

comes. Perhaps it may have a genius for the tight-rope. It may have any sort of genius, in short, if it takes after its mother, Johnson, for she is an universal genius; but, whatever its genius is, that genius shall be developed."

Expressing himself after these terms, Mr. Crummles put on his other eyebrow, and the calves of his legs, and then put on his legs, which were of a yellowish flesh-color, and rather soiled about the knees, from frequent going down upon those joints, in curses, prayers, last struggles, and other strong passages.

While the ex-manager completed his toilet, he informed Nicholas that as he should have a fair start in America, from the proceeds of a tolerably good engagement which he had been fortunate enough to obtain, and as he and Mrs. Crummles could scarcely hope to act forever — not being immortal, except in the breath of Fame and in a figurative sense — he had made up his mind to settle there permanently, in the hope of acquiring some land of his own which would support them in their old age, and which they could afterwards bequeath to their children. Nicholas, having highly commended this resolution, Mr. Crummles went on to impart such further intelligence relative to their mutual friends as he thought might prove interesting; informing Nicholas, among other things, that Miss Snevellicci was happily married to an affluent young wax-chandler who had supplied the theatre with candles, and that Mr. Lillyvick didn't dare to say his soul was his own, such was the tyrannical sway of Mrs. Lillyvick, who reigned paramount and supreme.

Nicholas responded to this confidence on the part of Mr. Crummles, by confiding to him his own name, situation, and prospects, and informing him in as few general

words as he could, of the circumstances which had led to their first acquaintance. After congratulating him with great heartiness on the improved state of his fortunes, Mr. Crummles gave him to understand that next morning he and his were to start for Liverpool, where the vessel lay which was to carry them from the shores of England, and that if Nicholas wished to take a last adieu of Mrs. Crummles, he must repair with him that night to a farewell-supper, given in honor of the family at a neighboring tavern ; at which Mr. Snittle Timberry would preside, while the honors of the vice-chair would be sustained by the African Swallower.

The room being by this time very warm and somewhat crowded, in consequence of the influx of four gentlemen, who had just killed each other in the piece under representation, Nicholas accepted the invitation, and promised to return at the conclusion of the performances ; preferring the cool air and twilight out of doors to the mingled perfume of gas, orange-peel, and gunpowder, which pervaded the hot and glaring theatre.

He availed himself of this interval to buy a silver snuff-box — the best his funds would afford — as a token of remembrance for Mr. Crummles, and having purchased besides a pair of ear-rings for Mrs. Crummles, a necklace for the Phenomenon, and a flaming shirt-pin for each of the young gentlemen, he refreshed himself with a walk, and returning a little after the appointed time, found the lights out, the theatre empty, the curtain raised for the night, and Mr. Crummles walking up and down the stage expecting his arrival.

" Timberry won't be long," said Mr. Crummles. " He played the audience out to-night. He does a faithful black in the last piece, and it takes him a little longer to wash himself."

"A very unpleasant line of character, I should think?" said Nicholas.

"No, I don't know," replied Mr. Crummles; "it comes off easily enough, and there's only the face and neck. We had a first-tragedy man in our company once, who, when he played Othello, used to black himself all over. But that's feeling a part and going into it as if you meant it; it isn't usual — more's the pity."

Mr. Snittle Timberry now appeared, arm in arm with the African Swallower, and, being introduced to Nicholas, raised his hat half a foot, and said he was proud to know him. The Swallower said the same, and looked and spoke remarkably like an Irishman.

"I see by the bills that you have been ill, sir," said Nicholas to Mr. Timberry. "I hope you are none the worse for your exertions to-night?"

Mr. Timberry in reply, shook his head with a gloomy air, tapped his chest several times with great significancy, and drawing his cloak more closely about him, said, "But no matter — no matter. Come!"

It is observable that when people upon the stage are in any strait involving the very last extremity of weakness and exhaustion, they invariably perform feats of strength requiring great ingenuity and muscular power. Thus, a wounded prince or bandit-chief, who is bleeding to death and too faint to move, except to the softest music (and then only upon his hands and knees), shall be seen to approach a cottage-door for aid, in such a series of writhings and twistings, and with such curlings up of the legs, and such rollings over and over, and such gettings up and tumblings down again, as could never be achieved save by a very strong man skilled in posture-making. And so natural did this sort of performance come to Mr.

Snittle Timberry, that on their way out of the theatre and towards the tavern where the supper was to be holden, he testified the severity of his recent indisposition and its wasting effects upon the nervous system, by a series of gymnastic performances, which were the admiration of all witnesses.

"Why this is indeed a joy I had not looked for!" said Mrs. Crummles, when Nicholas was presented.

"Nor I," replied Nicholas. "It is by a mere chance that I have this opportunity of seeing you, although I would have made a great exertion to have availed myself of it."

"Here is one whom you know," said Mrs. Crummles, thrusting forward the Phenomenon in a blue gauze frock, extensively flounced, and trousers of the same; "and here another — and another," presenting the Masters Crummleses. "And how is your friend, the faithful Digby?"

"Digby!" said Nicholas, forgetting at the instant that this had been Smike's theatrical name. "Oh yes. He's quite — what am I saying? — he is very far from well."

"How!" exclaimed Mrs. Crummles, with a tragic recoil.

"I fear," said Nicholas, shaking his head, and making an attempt to smile, "that your better-half would be more struck with him now, than ever."

"What mean you?" rejoined Mrs. Crummles, in her most popular manner. "Whence comes this altered tone?"

"I mean that a dastardly enemy of mine has struck at me through him, and that while he thinks to torture me, he inflicts on him such agonies of terror and suspense as —— You will excuse me, I am sure," said Nicholas,

checking himself. "I should never speak of this, and never do, except to those who know the facts, but for a moment I forgot myself."

With this hasty apology Nicholas stooped down to salute the Phenomenon, and changed the subject; inwardly cursing his precipitation, and very much wondering what Mrs. Crummles must think of so sudden an explosion.

That lady seemed to think very little about it, for the supper being by this time on table, she gave her hand to Nicholas and repaired with a stately step to the left hand of Mr. Snittle Timberry. Nicholas had the honor to support her, and Mr. Crummles was placed upon the chairman's right; the Phenomenon and the Masters Crummleses sustained the vice.

The company amounted in number to some twenty-five or thirty, being composed of such members of the theatrical profession, then engaged or disengaged in London, as were numbered among the most intimate friends of Mr. and Mrs. Crummles. The ladies and gentlemen were pretty equally balanced; the expenses of the entertainment being defrayed by the latter, each of whom had the privilege of inviting one of the former as his guest.

It was upon the whole a very distinguished party, for independently of the lesser theatrical lights who clustered on this occasion round Mr. Snittle Timberry, there was a literary gentleman present who had dramatized in his time two hundred and forty-seven novels as fast as they had come out — some of them faster than they had come out — and *was* a literary gentleman in consequence.

This gentleman sat on the left hand of Nicholas, to whom he was introduced by his friend the African Swallower, from the bottom of the table, with a high eulogium upon his fame and reputation.

"I am happy to know a gentleman of such great distinction," said Nicholas, politely.

"Sir," replied the wit, "you're very welcome, I'm sure. The honor is reciprocal, sir, as I usually say when I dramatize a book. Did you ever hear a definition of fame, sir?"

"I have heard several," replied Nicholas, with a smile. "What is yours?"

"When I dramatize a book, sir," said the literary gentleman, "*that's* fame — for its author."

"Oh, indeed!" rejoined Nicholas.

"That's fame, sir," said the literary gentleman.

"So Richard Turpin, Tom King, and Jerry Abershaw have handed down to fame the names of those on whom they committed their most impudent robberies?" said Nicholas.

"I don't know anything about that, sir," answered the literary gentleman.

"Shakspeare dramatized stories which had previously appeared in print, it is true," observed Nicholas.

"Meaning Bill, sir?" said the literary gentleman. "So he did. Bill was an adapter, certainly, so he was — and very well he adapted too —— considering."

"I was about to say," rejoined Nicholas, "that Shakspeare derived some of his plots from old tales and legends in general circulation; but it seems to me, that some of the gentlemen of your craft at the present day, have shot very far beyond him" —

"You're quite right, sir," interrupted the literary gentleman, leaning back in his chair and exercising his toothpick. "Human intellect, sir, has progressed since his time — is progressing — will progress" —

"Shot beyond him, I mean," resumed Nicholas, "in

quite another respect, for, whereas he brought within the magic circle of his genius, traditions peculiarly adapted for his purpose, and turned familiar things into constellations which should enlighten the world for ages, you drag within the magic circle of your dulness, subjects not at all adapted to the purposes of the stage, and debase as he exalted. For instance, you take the uncompleted books of living authors, fresh from their hands, wet from the press, cut, hack, and carve them to the powers and capacities of your actors, and the capability of your theatres, finish unfinished works, hastily and crudely vamp up ideas not yet worked out by their original projector, but which have doubtless cost him many thoughtful days and sleepless nights; by a comparison of incidents and dialogue, down to the very last word he may have written a fortnight before, do your utmost to anticipate his plot — all this without his permission, and against his will; and then, to crown the whole proceeding, publish in some mean pamphlet, an unmeaning farrago of garbled extracts from his work, to which you put your name as author, with the honorable distinction annexed, of having perpetrated a hundred other outrages of the same description. Now, show me the distinction between such pilfering as this, and picking a man's pocket in the street: unless, indeed, it be, that the legislature has a regard for pocket handkerchiefs, and leaves men's brains, except when they are knocked out by violence, to take care of themselves."

"Men must live, sir," said the literary gentleman, shrugging his shoulders.

"That would be an equally fair plea in both cases," replied Nicholas; "but if you put it upon that ground, I have nothing more to say, than, that if I were a writer

of books, and you a thirsty dramatist, I would rather pay your tavern-score for six months — large as it might be — than have a niche in the Temple of Fame with you for the humblest corner of my pedestal, through six hundred generations."

The conversation threatened to take a somewhat angry tone when it had arrived thus far, but Mrs. Crummles opportunely interposed to prevent its leading to any violent outbreak, by making some inquiries of the literary gentleman relative to the plots of the six new pieces which he had written by contract to introduce the African Knife-swallower in his various unrivalled performances. This speedily engaged him in an animated conversation with that lady, in the interest of which, all recollection of his recent discussion with Nicholas very quickly evaporated.

The board being now clear of the more substantial articles of food, and punch, wine, and spirits being placed upon it and handed about, the guests, who had been previously conversing in little groups of three or four, gradually fell off into a dead silence, while the majority of those present, glanced from time to time at Mr. Snittle Timberry, and the bolder spirits did not even hesitate to strike the table with their knuckles, and plainly intimate their expectations, by uttering such encouragements as "Now, Tim," "Wake up, Mr. Chairman," "All charged, sir, and waiting for a toast," and so forth.

To these remonstrances, Mr. Timberry deigned no other rejoinder than striking his chest and gasping for breath, and giving many other indications of being still the victim of indisposition — for a man must not make himself too cheap either on the stage or off — while Mr.

Crummles, who knew full well that he would be the subject of the forthcoming toast, sat gracefully in his chair with his arm thrown carelessly over the back, and now and then lifted his glass to his mouth and drank a little punch, with the same air with which he was accustomed to take long draughts of nothing, out of the pasteboard goblets in banquet scenes.

At length Mr. Snittle Timberry rose in the most approved attitude, with one hand in the breast of his waistcoat and the other on the nearest snuff-box, and having been received with great enthusiasm, proposed, with abundance of quotations, his friend Mr. Vincent Crummles: ending a pretty long speech by extending his right hand on one side and his left on the other, and severally calling upon Mr. and Mrs. Crummles to grasp the same. This done, Mr. Vincent Crummles returned thanks, and that done, the African Swallower proposed Mrs. Vincent Crummles, in affecting terms. Then were heard loud moans and sobs from Mrs. Crummles and the ladies, despite of which that heroic woman insisted upon returning thanks herself, which she did, in a manner and in a speech which has never been surpassed and seldom equalled. It then became the duty of Mr. Snittle Timberry to give the young Crummleses, which he did; after which Mr. Vincent Crummles, as their father, addressed the company in a supplementary speech, enlarging on their virtues, amiabilities, and excellences, and wishing that they were the sons and daughter of every lady and gentleman present. These solemnities having been succeeded by a decent interval, enlivened by musical and other entertainments, Mr. Crummles proposed that ornament of the profession, Mr. Snittle Timberry; and at a little later period of the evening, the health of

that other ornament of the profession, the African Swallower — his very dear friend, if he would allow him to call him so; which liberty (there being no particular reason why he should not allow it) the African Swallower graciously permitted. The literary gentleman was then about to be drunk, but it being discovered that he had been drunk for some time in another acceptation of the term, and was then asleep on the stairs, the intention was abandoned, and the honor transferred to the ladies. Finally, after a very long sitting, Mr. Snittle Timberry vacated the chair, and the company with many adieus and embraces dispersed.

Nicholas waited to the last to give his little presents. When he had said good-by all round and came to Mr. Crummles, he could not but mark the difference between their present separation and their parting at Portsmouth. Not a jot of his theatrical manner remained; he put out his hand with an air which, if he could have summoned it at will, would have made him the best actor of his day in homely parts, and when Nicholas shook it with the warmth he honestly felt, appeared thoroughly melted.

"We were a very happy little company, Johnson," said poor Crummles. "You and I never had a word. I shall be very glad to-morrow morning to think that I saw you again, but now I almost wish you hadn't come."

Nicholas was about to return a cheerful reply, when he was greatly disconcerted by the sudden apparition of Mrs. Grudden, who it seemed had declined to attend the supper in order that she might rise earlier in the morning, and who now burst out of an adjoining bedroom, habited in very extraordinary white robes: and throwing her arms about his neck, hugged him with great affection.

"What! Are you going too?" said Nicholas, submitting with as good a grace as if she had been the finest young creature in the world.

"Going?" returned Mrs. Grudden. "Lord ha' mercy, what do you think they'd do without me?"

Nicholas submitted to another hug with even a better grace than before, if that were possible, and waving his hat as cheerfully as he could, took farewell of the Vincent Crummleses.

CHAPTER XLIX.

CHRONICLES THE FURTHER PROCEEDINGS OF THE NICKLEBY FAMILY, AND THE SEQUEL OF THE ADVENTURE OF THE GENTLEMAN IN THE SMALL-CLOTHES.

While Nicholas, absorbed in the one engrossing subject of interest which had recently opened upon him, occupied his leisure hours with thoughts of Madeline Bray, and in execution of the commissions which the anxiety of Brother Charles in her behalf imposed upon him, saw her again and again, and each time with greater danger to his peace of mind and a more weakening effect upon the lofty resolutions he had formed, Mrs. Nickleby and Kate continued to live in peace and quiet, agitated by no other cares than those which were connected with certain harassing proceedings taken by Mr. Snawley for the recovery of his son, and their anxiety for Smike himself, whose health, long upon the wane, began to be so much affected by apprehension and uncertainty as sometimes to occasion both them and Nicholas considerable uneasiness, and even alarm.

It was no complaint or murmur on the part of the poor fellow himself that thus disturbed them. Ever eager to be employed in such slight services as he could render, and always anxious to repay his benefactors

with cheerful and happy looks, less friendly eyes might have seen in him no cause for any misgiving. But there were times — and often too — when the sunken eye was too bright, the hollow cheek too flushed, the breath too thick and heavy in its course, the frame too feeble and exhausted, to escape their regard and notice.

There is a dread disease which so prepares its victim, as it were, for death; which so refines it of its grosser aspect, and throws around familiar looks unearthly indications of the coming change — a dread disease, in which the struggle between soul and body is so gradual, quiet, and solemn, and the result so sure, that day by day, and grain by grain, the mortal part wastes and withers away, so that the spirit grows light and sanguine with its lightening load and feeling immortality at hand, deems it but a new term of mortal life — a disease in which death and life are so strangely blended, that death takes the glow and hue of life, and life the gaunt and grisly form of death — a disease which medicine never cured, wealth warded off, or poverty could boast exemption from — which sometimes moves in giant strides, and sometimes at a tardy sluggish pace, but, slow or quick, is ever sure and certain.

It was with some faint reference in his own mind to this disorder, though he would by no means admit it, even to himself, that Nicholas had already carried his faithful companion to a physician of great repute. There was no cause for immediate alarm, he said. There were no present symptoms which could be deemed conclusive. The constitution had been greatly tried and injured in childhood, but still it *might* not be — and that was all.

But he seemed to grow no worse, and as it was not

difficult to find a reason for these symptoms of illness in the shock and agitation he had recently undergone, Nicholas comforted himself with the hope that his poor friend would soon recover. This hope his mother and sister shared with him; and as the object of their joint solicitude seemed to have no uneasiness or despondency for himself, but each day answered with a quiet smile that he felt better than he had upon the day before, their fears abated, and the general happiness was by degrees restored.

Many and many a time in after years did Nicholas look back to this period of his life, and tread again the humble quiet homely scenes that rose up as of old before him. Many and many a time, in the twilight of a summer evening, or beside the flickering winter's fire — but not so often or so sadly then — would his thoughts wander back to these old days, and dwell with a pleasant sorrow upon every slight remembrance which they brought crowding home. The little room in which they had so often sat long after it was dark, figuring such happy futures — Kate's cheerful voice and merry laugh; and how, if she were from home they used to sit and watch for her return, scarcely breaking silence but to say how dull it seemed without her — the glee with which poor Smike would start from the darkened corner where he used to sit, and hurry to admit her, and the tears they often saw upon his face, half wondering to see them too and he so pleased and happy — every little incident, and even slight words and looks of those old days, little heeded then, but well remembered when busy cares and trials were quite forgot, came fresh and thick before him many and many a time, and, rustling above the dusty growth of years, came back green boughs of yesterday.

But there were other persons associated with these recollections, and many changes came about before they had being — a necessary reflection for the purposes of these adventures, which at once subside into their accustomed train, and shunning all flighty anticipations or wayward wanderings, pursue their steady and decorous course.

If the Brothers Cheeryble, as they found Nicholas worthy of trust and confidence, bestowed upon him every day some new and substantial mark of kindness, they were not less mindful of those who depended on him. Various little presents to Mrs. Nickleby — always of the very things they most required — tended in no slight degree to the improvement and embellishment of the cottage. Kate's little store of trinkets became quite dazzling; and for company!—— If Brother Charles and Brother Ned failed to look in for at least a few minutes every Sunday, or one evening in the week, there was Mr. Tim Linkinwater (who had never made half a dozen other acquaintances in all his life, and who took such delight in his new friends as no words can express) constantly coming and going in his evening walks, and stopping to rest; while Mr. Frank Cheeryble happened, by some strange conjunction of circumstances, to be passing the door on some business or other at least three nights in the week.

"He is the most attentive young man *I* ever saw, Kate," said Mrs. Nickleby to her daughter one evening, when this last-named gentleman had been the subject of the worthy lady's eulogium for some time, and Kate had sat perfectly silent.

"Attentive, mamma!" rejoined Kate.

"Bless my heart, Kate!" cried Mrs. Nickleby, with

her wonted suddenness, "what a color you have got; why, you're quite flushed!"

"Oh, mamma! what strange things you fancy."

"It wasn't fancy, Kate, my dear, I'm certain of that," returned her mother. "However, it's gone now at any rate, so it don't much matter whether it was or not. What was it we were talking about? Oh! Mr. Frank, I never saw such attention in *my* life, never."

"Surely you are not serious," returned Kate, coloring again; and this time beyond all dispute.

"Not serious!" returned Mrs. Nickleby; "why shouldn't I be serious? I'm sure I never was more serious. I will say that his politeness and attention to me is one of the most becoming, gratifying, pleasant things I have seen for a very long time. You don't often meet with such behavior in young men, and it strikes one more when one does meet with it."

"Oh! attention to *you*, mamma," rejoined Kate quickly —"oh yes."

"Dear me, Kate," retorted Mrs. Nickleby, "what an extraordinary girl you are. Was it likely I should be talking of his attention to anybody else? I declare I'm quite sorry to think he should be in love with a German lady, that I am."

"He said very positively that it was no such thing, mamma," returned Kate. "Don't you remember his saying so that very first night he came here? Besides," she added, in a more gentle tone, "why should *we* be sorry if it is the case? What is it to us, mamma?"

"Nothing to *us*, Kate, perhaps," said Mrs. Nickleby emphatically; "but something to *me*, I confess. I like English people to be thorough English people, and not half English and half I don't know what. I shall tell

him point-blank next time he comes, that I wish he would marry one of his own countrywomen ; and see what he says to that."

" Pray don't think of such a thing, mamma," returned Kate hastily ; " not for the world. Consider — how very " ——

" Well, my dear, how very what ! " said Mrs. Nickleby, opening her eyes in great astonishment.

Before Kate had returned any reply, a queer little double-knock announced that Miss La Creevy had called to see them ; and when Miss La Creevy presented herself, Mrs. Nickleby, though strongly disposed to be argumentative on the previous question, forgot all about it in a gush of supposes about the coach she had come by ; supposing that the man who drove must have been either the man in the shirt-sleeves or the man with the black eye ; that whoever he was, he hadn't found that parasol she left inside last week ; that no doubt they had stopped a long while at the Halfway House, coming down ; or that perhaps being full, they had come straight on ; and lastly, that they, surely, must have passed Nicholas on the road.

" I saw nothing of him," answered Miss La Creevy ; " but I saw that dear old soul Mr. Linkinwater."

" Taking his evening walk, and coming on to rest here, before he turns back to the city, I'll be bound ! " said Mrs Nickleby.

" I should think he was," returned Miss La Creevy ; " especially as young Mr. Cheeryble was with him."

" Surely that is no reason why Mr. Linkinwater should be coming here," said Kate.

" Why I think it is, my dear," said Miss La Creevy. " For a young man, Mr. Frank is not a very great

walker; and I observe that he generally falls tired, and requires a good long rest, when he has come as far as this. But where is my friend?" said the little woman, looking about, after having glanced slyly at Kate. "He has not been run away with again, has he?"

"Ah! where is Mr. Smike?" said Mrs. Nickleby; "he was here this instant."

Upon further inquiry, it turned out, to the good lady's unbounded astonishment, that Smike had, that moment, gone up-stairs to bed.

"Well now," said Mrs. Nickleby, "he is the strangest creature! Last Tuesday — was it Tuesday? Yes to be sure it was; you recollect, Kate, my dear, the very last time young Mr. Cheeryble was here — last Tuesday night he went off in just the same strange way, at the very moment the knock came to the door. It cannot be that he don't like company, because he is always fond of people who are fond of Nicholas, and I am sure young Mr. Cheeryble is. And the strangest thing is, that he does not go to bed; therefore it cannot be because he is tired. I know he doesn't go to bed, because my room is the next one, and when I went up-stairs last Tuesday, hours after him, I found that he had not even taken his shoes off; and he had no candle, so he must have sat moping in the dark all the time. Now, upon my word," said Mrs. Nickleby, "when I come to think of it, that's very extraordinary!"

As the hearers did not echo this sentiment, but remained profoundly silent, either as not knowing what to say, or as being unwilling to interrupt, Mrs. Nickleby pursued the thread of her discourse after her own fashion.

"I hope," said that lady, "that this unaccountable con-

duct may not be the beginning of his taking to his bed and living there all his life, like the Thirsty Woman of Tutbury, or the Cock-lane Ghost, or some of those extraordinary creatures. One of them had some connection with our family. I forget, without looking back to some old letters, I have up-stairs, whether it was my great-grandfather who went to school with the Cock-lane Ghost, or the Thirsty Woman of Tutbury who went to school with my grandmother. Miss La Creevy, you know, of course. Which was it that didn't mind what the clergyman said? The Cock-lane Ghost, or the Thirsty Woman of Tutbury?"

"The Cock-lane Ghost, I believe."

"Then I have no doubt," said Mrs. Nickleby, "that it was with him my great-grandfather went to school; for I know the master of his school was a dissenter, and that would, in a great measure, account for the Cock-lane Ghost's behaving in such an improper manner to the clergyman when he grew up. Ah! Train up a Ghost — child, I mean" ——

Any further reflections on this fruitful theme, were abruptly cut short by the arrival of Tim Linkinwater and Mr. Frank Cheeryble; in the hurry of receiving whom, Mrs. Nickleby speedily lost sight of everything else.

"I am so sorry Nicholas is not at home," said Mrs. Nickleby. "Kate, my dear, you must be both Nicholas and yourself."

"Miss Nickleby need be but herself," said Frank. "I — if I may venture to say so — oppose all change in her."

"Then at all events she shall press you to stay," returned Mrs. Nickleby. "Mr. Linkinwater says ten

minutes, but I cannot let you go so soon; Nicholas would be very much vexed, I am sure. Kate, my dear" ——

In obedience to a great number of nods, and winks, and frowns of extra significance, Kate added her entreaties that the visitors would remain; but it was observable that she addressed them exclusively to Tim Linkinwater; and there was, besides, a certain embarrassment in her manner, which, although it was as far from impairing its graceful character as the tinge it communicated to her cheek was from diminishing her beauty, was obvious at a glance even to Mrs. Nickleby. Not being of a very speculative character, however, save under circumstances when her speculations could be put into words and uttered aloud, that discreet matron attributed the emotion to the circumstance of her daughter's not happening to have her best frock on — "though I never saw her look better, certainly," she reflected at the same time. Having settled the question in this way, and being most complacently satisfied that in this, as in all other instances, her conjecture could not fail to be the right one, Mrs. Nickleby dismissed it from her thoughts, and inwardly congratulated herself on being so shrewd and knowing.

Nicholas did not come home nor did Smike reappear; but neither circumstance, to say the truth, had any great effect upon the little party, who were all in the best humor possible. Indeed, there sprung up quite a flirtation between Miss La Creevy and Tim Linkinwater, who said a thousand jocose and facetious things, and became, by degrees, quite gallant, not to say tender. Little Miss La Creevy, on her part, was in high spirits, and rallied Tim on having remained a bachelor all his life with so

much success, that Tim was actually induced to declare, that if he could get anybody to have him, he didn't know but what he might change his condition even yet. Miss La Creevy earnestly recommended a lady she knew, who would exactly suit Mr. Linkinwater, and had a very comfortable property of her own; but this latter qualification had very little effect upon Tim, who manfully protested that fortune would be no object with him, but that true worth and cheerfulness of disposition were what a man should look for in a wife, and that if he had these, he could find money enough for the moderate wants of both. This avowal was considered so honorable to Tim, that neither Mrs. Nickleby nor Miss La Creevy could sufficiently extol it; and stimulated by their praises, Tim launched out into several other declarations also manifesting the disinterestedness of his heart, and a great devotion to the fair sex: which were received with no less approbation. This was done and said with a comical mixture of jest and earnest, and, leading to a great amount of laughter, made them very merry indeed.

Kate was commonly the life and soul of the conversation at home; but she was more silent than usual upon this occasion — perhaps because Tim and Miss La Creevy engrossed so much of it — and, keeping aloof from the talkers, sat at the window watching the shadows as the evening closed in, and enjoying the quiet beauty of the night, which seemed to have scarcely less attractions for Frank, who first lingered near, and then sat down beside, her. No doubt, there are a great many things to be said appropriate to a summer evening, and no doubt they are best said in a low voice, as being most suitable to the peace and serenity of the hour: long pauses, too, at times, and then an earnest word or so, and then another

interval of silence which, somehow, does not seem like silence either, and perhaps now and then a hasty turning away of the head, or drooping of the eyes towards the ground — all these minor circumstances, with a disinclination to have candles introduced and a tendency to confuse hours with minutes, are doubtless mere influences of the time, as many lovely lips can clearly testify. Neither is there the slightest reason why Mrs. Nickleby should have expressed surprise when — candles being at length brought in — Kate's bright eyes were unable to bear the light which obliged her to avert her face, and even to leave the room for some short time; because when one has sat in the dark so long, candles *are* dazzling, and nothing can be more strictly natural than that such results should be produced, as all well-informed young people know. For that matter, old people know it too, or did know it once, but they forget these things sometimes, and more's the pity.

The good lady's surprise, however, did not end here. It was greatly increased when it was discovered that Kate had not the least appetite for supper: a discovery so alarming that there is no knowing in what unaccountable efforts of oratory Mrs. Nickleby's apprehensions might have been vented, if the general attention had not been attracted, at the moment, by a very strange and uncommon noise, proceeding, as the pale and trembling servant-girl affirmed, and as everybody's sense of hearing seemed to affirm also, "right down" the chimney of the adjoining room.

It being quite plain to the comprehension of all present that, however extraordinary and improbable it might appear, the noise did nevertheless proceed from the chimney in question; and the noise (which was a strange com-

pound of various shuffling, sliding, rumbling, and struggling sounds, all muffled by the chimney) still continuing, Frank Cheeryble caught up a candle, and Tim Linkinwater the tongs, and they would have very quickly ascertained the cause of this disturbance if Mrs. Nickleby had not been taken very faint, and declined being left behind, on any account. This produced a short remonstrance, which terminated in their all proceeding to the troubled chamber in a body, excepting only Miss La Creevy, who — as the servant-girl volunteered a confession of having been subject to fits in her infancy — remained with her to give the alarm and apply restoratives, in case of extremity.

Advancing to the door of the mysterious apartment, they were not a little surprised to hear a human voice, chanting with a highly elaborated expression of melancholy, and in tones of suffocation which a human voice might have produced from under five or six feather-beds of the best quality, the once popular air of "Has she then failed in her truth, the beautiful maid I adore!" Nor, on bursting into the room without demanding a parley, was their astonishment lessened by the discovery that these romantic sounds certainly proceeded from the throat of some man up the chimney, of whom nothing was visible but a pair of legs, which were dangling above the grate; apparently feeling, with extreme anxiety, for the top bar whereon to effect a landing.

A sight so unusual and unbusiness-like as this, completely paralyzed Tim Linkinwater, who, after one or two gentle pinches at the stranger's ankles, which were productive of no effect, stood clapping the tongs together, as if he were sharpening them for another assault, and did nothing else.

"This must be some drunken fellow," said Frank. "No thief would announce his presence thus."

As he said this, with great indignation, he raised the candle to obtain a better view of the legs, and was darting forward to pull them down with very little ceremony, when Mrs. Nickleby, clasping her hands, uttered a sharp sound, something between a scream and an exclamation, and demanded to know whether the mysterious limbs were not clad in small-clothes and gray worsted stockings, or whether her eyes had deceived her.

"Yes," cried Frank, looking a little closer. "Small-clothes certainly, and — and — rough gray stockings, too. Do you know him, ma'am?"

"Kate, my dear," said Mrs. Nickleby, deliberately sitting herself down in a chair with that sort of desperate resignation which seemed to imply that now matters had come to a crisis, and all disguise was useless, "you will have the goodness, my love, to explain precisely how this matter stands. I have given him no encouragement — none whatever — not the least in the world. You know that, my dear, perfectly well. He was very respectful — exceedingly respectful — when he declared, as you were a witness to; still at the same time, if I am to be persecuted in this way, if vegetable what's-his-names and all kinds of garden-stuff are to strew my path out of doors, and gentlemen are to come choking up our chimneys at home, I really don't know — upon my word I do *not* know — what is to become of me. It's a very hard case — harder than anything I was ever exposed to, before I married your poor dear papa, though I suffered a good deal of annoyance then — but that, of course, I expected, and made up my mind for. When I was not nearly so old as you, my dear,

there was a young gentleman who sat next us at church, who used, almost every Sunday, to cut my name in large letters in the front of his pew while the sermon was going on. It was gratifying, of course, naturally so, but still it was an annoyance, because the pew was in a very conspicuous place, and he was several times publicly taken out by the beadle for doing it. But that was nothing to this. This is a great deal worse, and a great deal more embarrassing. I would rather, Kate, my dear," said Mrs. Nickleby, with great solemnity, and an effusion of tears — "I would rather, I declare, have been a pig-faced lady, than be exposed to such a life as this!"

Frank Cheeryble and Tim Linkinwater looked, in irrepressible astonishment, first at each other and then at Kate, who felt that some explanation was necessary, but who, between her terror at the apparition of the legs, her fear lest their owner should be smothered, and her anxiety to give the least ridiculous solution of the mystery that it was capable of bearing, was quite unable to utter a single word.

"He gives me great pain," continued Mrs. Nickleby, drying her eyes — "great pain; but don't hurt a hair of his head, I beg. On no account hurt a hair of his head."

It would not, under existing circumstances, have been quite so easy to hurt a hair of the gentleman's head as Mrs. Nickleby seemed to imagine, inasmuch as that part of his person was some feet up the chimney, which was by no means a wide one. But, as all this time, he had never left off singing about the bankruptcy of the beautiful maid in respect of truth, and now began not only to croak very feebly, but to kick with great violence as

if respiration became a task of difficulty, Frank Cheerybles, without further hesitation, pulled at the shorts and worsteds with such heartiness as to bring him floundering into the room with greater precipitation than he had quite calculated upon.

"Oh! yes, yes," said Kate, directly the whole figure of this singular visitor appeared in this abrupt manner. "I know who it is. Pray don't be rough with him. Is he hurt? I hope not — oh, pray see if he is hurt."

"He is not, I assure you," replied Frank, handling the object of his surprise, after this appeal, with sudden tenderness and respect. "He is not hurt in the least."

"Don't let him come any nearer," said Kate, retiring as far as she could.

"No no, he shall not," rejoined Frank. "You see I have him secure here. But may I ask you, what this means, and whether you expected this old gentleman?"

"Oh, no," said Kate, "of course not; but he — mamma does not think so, I believe — but he is a mad gentleman who has escaped from the next house, and must have found an opportunity of secreting himself here."

"Kate," interposed Mrs. Nickleby with severe dignity, "I am surprised at you."

"Dear mamma" — Kate gently remonstrated.

"I am surprised at you," repeated Mrs. Nickleby; "upon my word, Kate, I am quite astonished that you should join the persecutors of this unfortunate gentleman, when you know very well that they have the basest designs upon his property, and that that is the whole secret of it. It would be much kinder of you,

Kate, to ask Mr. Linkinwater or Mr. Cheeryble to interfere in his behalf, and see him righted. You ought not to allow your feelings to influence you; it's not right — very far from it. What should my feelings be, do you suppose? If anybody ought to be indignant, who is it? I, of course, and very properly so. Still, at the same time, I wouldn't commit such an injustice for the world. No," continued Mrs. Nickleby, drawing herself up, and looking another way with a kind of bashful stateliness; "this gentleman will understand me when I tell him that I repeat the answer I gave him the other day, — that I always will repeat it, though I do believe him to be sincere when I find him placing himself in such dreadful situations on my account — and that I request him to have the goodness to go away directly, or it will be impossible to keep his behavior a secret from my son Nicholas. I am obliged to him, very much obliged to him, but I cannot listen to his addresses for a moment. It's quite impossible."

While this address was in course of delivery, the old gentleman, with his nose and cheeks embellished with large patches of soot, sat upon the ground with his arms folded, eying the spectators in profound silence, and with a very majestic demeanor. He did not appear to take the smallest notice of what Mrs. Nickleby said, but when she ceased to speak he honored her with a long stare, and inquired if she had quite finished.

"I have nothing more to say," replied that lady modestly. "I really cannot say anything more."

"Very good," said the old gentleman, raising his voice, "then bring in the bottled lightning, a clean tumbler, and a corkscrew."

Nobody executing this order, the old gentleman, after

a short pause, raised his voice again and demanded a thunder sandwich. This article not being forthcoming either, he requested to be served with a fricassee of boot-tops and gold-fish sauce, and then laughing heartily, gratified his hearers with a very long, very loud, and most melodious bellow.

But still Mrs. Nickleby, in reply to the significant looks of all about her, shook her head as though to assure them that she saw nothing whatever in all this, unless, indeed, it were a slight degree of eccentricity. She might have remained impressed with these opinions down to the latest moment of her life, but for a slight train of circumstances, which, trivial as they were, altered the whole complexion of the case.

It happened that Miss La Creevy, finding her patient in no very threatening condition, and being strongly impelled by curiosity to see what was going forward, bustled into the room while the old gentleman was in the very act of bellowing. It happened, too, that the instant the old gentleman saw her, he stopped short, skipped suddenly on his feet, and fell to kissing his hand violently: a change of demeanor which almost terrified the little portrait-painter out of her senses, and caused her to retreat behind Tim Linkinwater with the utmost expedition.

"Aha!" cried the old gentleman, folding his hands, and squeezing them with great force against each other. "I see her now; I see her now! my love, my life, my bride, my peerless beauty. She is come at last — at last — and all is gas and gaiters!"

Mrs. Nickleby looked rather disconcerted for a moment, but immediately recovering, nodded to Miss La Creevy and the other spectators several times, and

frowned, and smiled gravely; giving them to understand that she saw where the mistake was, and would set it all to rights in a minute or two.

"She is come!" said the old gentleman, laying his hand upon his heart. "Cormoran and Blunderbore! She is come! All the wealth I have is hers if she will take me for her slave. Where are grace, beauty, and blandishments, like those? In the Empress of Madagascar? No. In the Queen of Diamonds? No. In Mrs. Rowland, who every morning bathes in Kalydor for nothing? No. Melt all these down into one, with the three Graces, the nine Muses, and fourteen biscuit-bakers' daughters from Oxford Street, and make a woman half as lovely. Pho! I defy you."

After uttering this rhapsody, the old gentleman snapped his fingers twenty or thirty times, and then subsided into an ecstatic contemplation of Miss La Creevy's charms. This affording Mrs. Nickleby a favorable opportunity of explanation, she went about it straight.

"I am sure," said the worthy lady, with a prefatory cough, "that it's a great relief, under such trying circumstances as these, to have anybody else mistaken for me — a very great relief; and it's a circumstance that never occurred before, although I have several times been mistaken for my daughter Kate. I have no doubt the people were very foolish, and perhaps ought to have known better, but still they did take me for her, and of course that was no fault of mine, and it would be very hard indeed if I was to be made responsible for it. However, in this instance, of course, I must feel that I should do exceedingly wrong if I suffered anybody — especially anybody that I am under great obligations to — to be made uncomfortable on my account,

and therefore I think it my duty to tell that gentleman that he is mistaken — that I am the lady who he was told by some impertinent person was niece to the Council of Paving-stones, and that I do beg and entreat of him to go quietly away, if it's only for" — here Mrs. Nickleby simpered and hesitated — "for *my* sake."

It might have been expected that the old gentleman would have been penetrated to the heart by the delicacy and condescension of this appeal, and that he would at least have returned a courteous and suitable reply. What, then, was the shock which Mrs. Nickleby received, when, accosting *her* in the most unmistakable manner, he replied in a loud and sonorous voice — "Avaunt —— Cat!"

"Sir!" cried Mrs. Nickleby, in a faint tone.

"Cat!" repeated the old gentleman. "Puss, Kit, Tit, Grimalkin, Tabby, Brindle — Whoosh!" with which last sound, uttered in a hissing manner between his teeth, the old gentleman swung his arms violently round and round, and at the same time alternately advanced on Mrs. Nickleby, and retreated from her, in that species of savage dance with which boys on market-days may be seen to frighten pigs, sheep, and other animals, when they give out obstinate indications of turning down a wrong street.

Mrs. Nickleby wasted no words, but uttered an exclamation of horror and surprise, and immediately fainted away.

"I'll attend to mamma," said Kate, hastily; "I am not at all frightened. But pray take him away; pray take him away!"

Frank was not at all confident of his power of complying with this request, until he bethought himself of the stratagem of sending Miss La Creevy on a few paces

in advance, and urging the old gentleman to follow her. It succeeded to a miracle; and he went away in a rapture of admiration, strongly guarded by Tim Linkinwater on one side, and Frank himself on the other.

"Kate," murmured Mrs. Nickleby, reviving when the coast was clear, "is he gone?"

She was assured that he was.

"I shall never forgive myself, Kate," said Mrs. Nickleby; "Never! That gentleman has lost his senses, and *I* am the unhappy cause."

"*You* the cause!" said Kate, greatly astonished.

"I, my love," replied Mrs. Nickleby, with a desperate calmness. "You saw what he was the other day; you see what he is now. I told your brother, weeks and weeks ago, Kate, that I hoped a disappointment might not be too much for him. You see what a wreck he is. Making allowance for his being a little flighty, you know how rationally, and sensibly, and honorably he talked, when we saw him in the garden. You have heard the dreadful nonsense he has been guilty of, this night, and the manner in which he has gone on with that poor unfortunate little old maid. Can anybody doubt how all this has been brought about!"

"I should scarcely think they could," said Kate mildly.

"*I* should scarcely think so, either," rejoined her mother. "Well! if I am the unfortunate cause of this, I have the satisfaction of knowing that I am not to blame. I told Nicholas — I said to him, 'Nicholas, my dear, we should be very careful how we proceed.' He would scarcely hear me. If the matter had only been properly taken up at first, as I wished it to be—— But you are both of you so like your poor papa. How-

ever, I have *my* consolation, and that should be enough for me!"

Washing her hands, thus, of all responsibility under this head, past, present, or to come, Mrs. Nickleby kindly added that she hoped her children might never have greater cause to reproach themselves than she had, and prepared herself to receive the escort, who soon returned with the intelligence that the old gentleman was safely housed, and that they found his custodians, who had been making merry with some friends, wholly ignorant of his absence.

Quiet being again restored, a delicious half hour — so Frank called it, in the course of subsequent conversation with Tim Linkinwater as they were walking home — a delicious half hour was spent in conversation, and Tim's watch at length apprising him that it was high time to depart, the ladies were left alone, though not without many offers on the part of Frank to remain until Nicholas arrived, no matter what hour of the night it might be, if, after the late neighborly irruption, they entertained the least fear of being left to themselves. As their freedom from all further apprehension, however, left no pretext for his insisting on mounting guard, he was obliged to abandon the citadel, and to retire with the trusty Tim.

Nearly three hours of silence passed away. Kate blushed to find, when Nicholas returned, how long she had been sitting alone, occupied with her own thoughts.

"I really thought it had not been half an hour," she said.

"They must have been pleasant thoughts, Kate," rejoined Nicholas gayly, "to make time pass away like that. What were they now?"

Kate was confused; she toyed with some trifle on the

table — looked up and smiled — looked down and dropped a tear.

"Why, Kate," said Nicholas, drawing his sister towards him and kissing her, "let me see your face. No? Ah! that was but a glimpse; that's scarcely fair. A longer look than that, Kate. Come — and I'll read your thoughts for you."

There was something in this proposition, albeit it was said without the slightest consciousness or application, which so alarmed his sister, that Nicholas laughingly changed the subject to domestic matters, and thus gathered, by degrees, as they left the room and went upstairs together, how lonely Smike had been all night — and by very slow degrees, too; for on this subject also, Kate seemed to speak with some reluctance.

"Poor fellow," said Nicholas, tapping gently at his door, "what can be the cause of all this!"

Kate was hanging on her brother's arm. The door being quickly opened, she had not time to disengage herself, before Smike, very pale and haggard, and completely dressed, confronted them.

"And have you not been to bed?" said Nicholas.

"N — n — no," was the reply.

Nicholas gently detained his sister, who made an effort to retire; and asked, "Why not?"

"I could not sleep," said Smike, grasping the hand which his friend extended to him.

"You are not well?" rejoined Nicholas.

"I am better, indeed — a great deal better," said Smike quickly.

"Then why do you give way to these fits of melancholy?" inquired Nicholas, in his kindest manner; "or why not tell us the cause? You grow a different creature, Smike."

"I do; I know I do," he replied. "I will tell you the reason one day, but not now. I hate myself for this; you are all so good and kind. But I cannot help it. My heart is very full; — you do not know how full it is."

He wrung Nicholas's hand before he released it; and, glancing, for a moment, at the brother and sister as they stood together, as if there were something in their strong affection which touched him very deeply, withdrew into his chamber, and was soon the only watcher under that quiet roof.

CHAPTER L.

INVOLVES A SERIOUS CATASTROPHE.

THE little race-course at Hampton was in the full tide and height of its gayety; the day as dazzling as day could be; the sun high in the cloudless sky, and shining in its fullest splendor. Every gaudy color that fluttered in the air from carriage-seat and garish tent-top, shone out in its gaudiest hues. Old dingy flags grew new again, faded gilding was reburnished, stained rotten canvas looked a snowy white, the very beggars' rags were freshened up, and sentiment quite forgot its charity in its fervent admiration of poverty so picturesque.

It was one of those scenes of life and animation, caught in its very brightest and freshest moments, which can scarcely fail to please; for if the eye be tired of show and glare, or the ear be weary with a ceaseless round of noise, the one may repose, turn almost where it will, on eager, happy, and expectant faces, and the other deaden all consciousness of more annoying sounds in those of mirth and exhilaration. Even the sunburnt faces of gypsy children, half naked though they be, suggest a drop of comfort. It is a pleasant thing to see that the sun has been there; to know that the air and light are on them every day; to feel that they *are* children, and lead children's lives; that if their pillows be damp, it is

with the dews of heaven, and not with tears: that the limbs of their girls are free, and that they are not crippled by distortions, imposing an unnatural and horrible penance upon their sex; that their lives are spent, from day to day, at least among the waving trees, and not in the midst of dreadful engines which make young children old before they know what childhood is, and give them the exhaustion and infirmity of age, without, like age, the privilege to die. God send that old nursery tales were true, and that gypsies stole such children by the score!

The great race of the day had just been run; and the close lines of people, on either side of the course, suddenly breaking up and pouring into it, imparted a new liveliness to the scene, which was again all busy movement. Some, hurried eagerly to catch a glimpse of the winning horse; others darted to and fro, searching, no less eagerly, for the carriages they had left in quest of better stations. Here, a little knot gathered round a pea and thimble table to watch the plucking of some unhappy greenhorn; and there, another proprietor with his confederates in various disguises — one man in spectacles, another, with an eye-glass and a stylish hat; a third, dressed as a farmer well to do in the world, with his top-coat over his arm and his flash notes in a large leathern pocket-book; and all with heavy-handled whips to represent most innocent country fellows who had trotted there on horseback — sought, by loud and noisy talk and pretended play, to entrap some unwary customer, while the gentlemen confederates (of more villanous aspect still, in clean linen and good clothes,) betrayed their close interest in the concern by the anxious furtive glance they cast on all new-comers. These, would be

hanging on the outskirts of a wide circle of people assembled round some itinerant juggler, opposed, in his turn, by a noisy band of music, or the classic game of "Ring the Bull," while ventriloquists holding dialogues with wooden dolls, and fortune-telling women smothering the cries of real babies, divided with them, and many more, the general attention of the company. Drinking-tents were full, glasses began to clink in carriages, hampers to be unpacked, tempting provisions to be set forth, knives and forks to rattle, champagne corks to fly, eyes to brighten that were not dull before, and pick-pockets to count their gains during the last heat. The attention so recently strained on one object of interest, was now divided among a hundred; and, look where you would, there was a motley assemblage of feasting, laughing, talking, begging, gambling, and mummery.

Of the gambling-booths there was a plentiful show, flourishing in all the splendor of carpeted ground, striped hangings, crimson cloth, pinnacled roofs, geranium-pots, and livery servants. There were the Stranger's club-house, the Athenæum club-house, the Hampton club-house, the Saint James's club-house, and half-a-mile of club-houses to play *in;* and there were *rouge-et-noir*, French hazard, and *La Morveille*, to play *at*. It is into one of these booths that our story takes its way.

Fitted up with three tables for the purposes of play, and crowded with players and lookers-on, it was — although the largest place of the kind upon the course — intensely hot, notwithstanding that a portion of the canvas roof was rolled back to admit more air, and there were two doors for a free passage in and out. Excepting one or two men who — each with a long roll of half-crowns, checkered with a few stray sovereigns, in his

left hand — staked their money at every roll of the ball with a business-like sedateness which showed that they were used to it, and had been playing all day, and most probably all the day before, there was no very distinctive character about the players, who were chiefly young men, apparently attracted by curiosity, or staking small sums as part of the amusement of the day, with no very great interest in winning or losing. There were two persons present, however, who, as peculiarly good specimens of a class, deserve a passing notice.

Of these, one was a man of six- or eight-and-fifty, who sat on a chair near one of the entrances of the booth, with his hands folded on the top of his stick, and his chin appearing above them. He was a tall, fat, long-bodied man, buttoned up to the throat in a light green coat, which made his body look still longer than it was: and wore, besides, drab breeches and gaiters, a white neckerchief, and a broad-brimmed white hat. Amid all the buzzing noise of the games, and the perpetual passing in and out of people, he seemed perfectly calm and abstracted, without the smallest particle of excitement in his composition. He exhibited no indication of weariness, nor, to a casual observer, of interest either. There he sat, quite still and collected. Sometimes, but very rarely, he nodded to some passing face, or beckoned to a waiter to obey a call from one of the tables. The next instant he subsided into his old state. He might have been some profoundly deaf old gentleman, who had come in to take a rest, or he might have been patiently waiting for a friend, without the least consciousness of anybody's presence, or fixed in a trance, or under the influence of opium. People turned round and looked at him; he made no gesture, caught nobody's eye, — let them pass

away, and others come on and be succeeded by others, and took no notice. When he did move, it seemed wonderful how he could have seen anything to occasion it. And so, in truth, it was. But there was not a face that passed in or out, which this man failed to see; not a gesture at any one of the three tables that was lost upon him; not a word, spoken by the bankers, but reached his ear; not a winner or loser he could not have marked; and he was the proprietor of the place.

The other presided over the *rouge-et-noir* table. He was probably some ten years younger, and was a plump, paunchy, sturdy-looking fellow, with his under lip a little pursed, from a habit of counting money inwardly as he paid it, but with no decidedly bad expression in his face, which was rather an honest and jolly one than otherwise. He wore no coat, the weather being hot, and stood behind the table with a huge mound of crowns and half-crowns before him, and a cash-box for notes. This game was constantly playing. Perhaps twenty people would be staking at the same time. This man had to roll the ball, to watch the stakes as they were laid down, to gather them off the color which lost, to pay those who won, to do it all with the utmost despatch, to roll the ball again, and to keep this game perpetually alive. He did it all with a rapidity absolutely marvellous; never hesitating, never making a mistake, never stopping, and never ceasing to repeat such unconnected phrases as the following, which, partly from habit, and partly to have something appropriate and business-like to say, he constantly poured out with the same monotonous emphasis, and in nearly the same order, all day long: —

"Rooge-a-nore from Paris! Gentlemen, make your game and back your own opinions — any time while the

ball rolls — rooge-a-nore from Paris gentlemen, it's a French game, gentlemen, I brought it over myself, I did indeed! — rooge-a-nore from Paris — black wins — black — stop a minute, sir, and I'll pay you directly — two there, half a pound there, three there — and one there — gentlemen, the ball's a-rolling — any time, sir, while the ball rolls! — the beauty of this game is, that you can double your stakes or put down your money, gentlemen, any time while the ball rolls — black again — black wins — I never saw such a thing — I never did, in all my life, upon my word I never did; if any gentleman had been backing the black in the last five minutes he must have won five-and-forty pound in four rolls of the ball, he must indeed — Gentlemen, we've port, sherry, cigars, and most excellent champagne. Here, wai-ter, bring a bottle of champagne, and let's have a dozen or fifteen cigars here — and let's be comfortable, gentlemen — and bring some clean glasses — any time while the ball rolls! I lost one hundred and thirty-seven pound yesterday, gentlemen, at one roll of the ball, I did indeed! — how do you do, sir," (recognizing some knowing gentleman without any halt or change of voice, and giving a wink so slight that it seems an accident) "will you take a glass of sherry, sir — here, wai-ter! bring a clean glass, and hand the sherry to this gentleman — and hand it round, will you, waiter — this is the rooge-a-nore from Paris, gentlemen — any time while the ball rolls! — gentlemen, make your game, and back your own opinions — it's the rooge-a-nore from Paris — quite a new game, I brought it over myself, I did indeed — gentlemen, the ball's a-rolling!"

This officer was busily plying his vocation when half a dozen persons sauntered through the booth, to whom —

but without stopping either in his speech or work — he bowed respectfully; at the same time, directing, by a look, the attention of a man beside him to the tallest figure in the group, in recognition of whom the proprietor pulled off his hat. This was Sir Mulberry Hawk, with whom were his friend and pupil, and a small train of gentlemanly-dressed men, of characters more doubtful than obscure.

The proprietor, in a low voice, bade Sir Mulberry good-day. Sir Mulberry, in the same tone, bade the proprietor go to the devil, and turned to speak with his friends.

There was evidently an irritable consciousness about him that he was an object of curiosity, on this first occasion of showing himself in public after the accident that had befallen him; and it was easy to perceive that he appeared on the race-course, that day, more in the hope of meeting with a great many people who knew him, and so getting over as much as possible of the annoyance at once, than with any purpose of enjoying the sport. There yet remained a slight scar upon his face, and whenever he was recognized, as he was almost every minute by people sauntering in and out, he made a restless effort to conceal it with his glove; showing how keenly he felt the disgrace he had undergone.

"Ah! Hawk," said one very sprucely-dressed personage in a Newmarket coat, a choice neckerchief, and all other accessories of the most unexceptionable kind. "How d'ye do, old fellow?"

This was a rival trainer of young noblemen and gentlemen, and the person of all others whom Sir Mulberry most hated and dreaded to meet. They shook hands with excessive cordiality.

"And how are you now, old fellow, hey?"

"Quite well, quite well," said Sir Mulberry.

"That's right," said the other. "How d'ye do, Verisopht? He's a little pulled down, our friend here — rather out of condition still, hey?"

It should be observed that the gentleman had very white teeth, and that when there was no excuse for laughing, he generally finished with the same monosyllable, which he uttered so as to display them.

"He's in very good condition; there's nothing the matter with him," said the young man carelessly.

"Upon my soul I'm glad to hear it," rejoined the other. "Have you just returned from Brussels?"

"We only reached town late last night," said Lord Frederick. Sir Mulberry turned away to speak to one of his own party, and feigned not to hear.

"Now, upon my life," said the friend, affecting to speak in a whisper, "it's an uncommonly bold and game thing in Hawk to show himself so soon. I say it advisedly; there's a vast deal of courage in it. You see he has just rusticated long enough to excite curiosity, and not long enough for men to have forgotten that deused unpleasant — by the by — you know the rights of the affair, of course? Why did you never give those confounded papers the lie? I seldom read the papers, but I looked in the papers for that, and may I be" ——

"Look in the papers," interrupted Sir Mulberry, turning suddenly round — "to-morrow — no, next day, will you?"

"Upon my life, my dear fellow, I seldom or never read the papers," said the other, shrugging his shoulders, "but I will, at your recommendation. What shall I look for?"

"Good-day," said Sir Mulberry, turning abruptly on his heel, and drawing his pupil with him. Falling, again, into the loitering careless pace at which they had entered, they lounged out, arm in arm.

"I won't give him a case of murder to read," muttered Sir Mulberry with an oath; "but it shall be something very near it if whip-cord cuts and bludgeons bruise."

His companion said nothing, but there was something in his manner which galled Sir Mulberry to add, with nearly as much ferocity as if his friend had been Nicholas himself,

"I sent Jenkins to old Nickleby before eight o'clock this morning. He's a stanch one; he was back with me before the messenger. I had it all from him in the first five minutes. I know where this hound is to be met with — time and place both. But there's no need to talk; to-morrow will soon be here."

"And wha-at's to be done to-morrow?" inquired Lord Frederick.

Sir Mulberry Hawk honored him with an angry glance, but condescended to return no verbal answer to this inquiry. Both walked sullenly on, as though their thoughts were busily occupied, until they were quite clear of the crowd, and almost alone, when Sir Mulberry wheeled round to return.

"Stop," said his companion, "I want to speak to you — in earnest. Don't turn back. Let us walk here, a few minutes."

"What have you to say to me, that you could not say yonder as well as here?" returned his Mentor, disengaging his arm.

"Hawk," rejoined the other, "tell me; I must know" —

"*Must* know," interrupted the other disdainfully. "Whew! Go on. If you must know, of course there's no escape for me. Must know!"

"Must ask then," returned Lord Frederick, "and must press you for a plain and straightforward answer —is what you have just said, only a mere whim of the moment, occasioned by your being out of humor and irritated, or is it your serious intention, and one that you have actually contemplated?"

"Why, don't you remember what passed on the subject one night, when I was laid up with a broken limb?" said Sir Mulberry, with a sneer.

"Perfectly well."

"Then take that for an answer, in the devil's name," replied Sir Mulberry, "and ask me for no other."

Such was the ascendency he had acquired over his dupe, and such the latter's general habit of submission, that, for the moment, the young man seemed half-afraid to pursue the subject. He soon overcame this feeling, however, if it had restrained him at all, and retorted angrily:

"If I remember what passed at the time you speak of, I expressed a strong opinion on this subject, and said that, with my knowledge or consent, you never should do what you threaten now."

"Will you prevent me?" asked Sir Mulberry, with a laugh.

"Ye-es, if I can;" returned the other, promptly.

"A very proper saving clause, that last," said Sir Mulberry; "and one you stand in need of. Oh! look to your own business, and leave me to look to mine."

"This *is* mine," retorted Lord Frederick. "I make

it mine; I will make it mine. It's mine already. I am more compromised than I should be, as it is."

"Do as you please, and what you please, for yourself," said Sir Mulberry, affecting an easy good-humor. "Surely that must content you! Do nothing for me; that's all. I advise no man to interfere in proceedings that I choose to take. I am sure you know me better than to do so. The fact is, I see, you mean to offer me advice. It is well meant, I have no doubt, but I reject it. Now, if you please, we will return to the carriage. I find no entertainment here, but quite the reverse. If we prolong this conversation, we might quarrel, which would be no proof of wisdom in either you or me."

With this rejoinder, and waiting for no further discussion, Sir Mulberry Hawk yawned, and very leisurely turned back.

There was not a little tact and knowledge of the young lord's disposition in this mode of treating him. Sir Mulberry clearly saw that if his dominion were to last, it must be established now. He knew that the moment he became violent, the young man would become violent too. He had, many times, been enabled to strengthen his influence, when any circumstance had occurred to weaken it, by adopting this cool and laconic style; and he trusted to it now, with very little doubt of its entire success.

But while he did this, and wore the most careless and indifferent deportment that his practised arts enabled him to assume, he inwardly resolved, not only to visit all the mortification of being compelled to suppress his feelings, with additional severity upon Nicholas, but also to make the young lord pay dearly for it, one day, in some shape or other. So long as he had been a passive instrument in his hands, Sir Mulberry had regarded him with no

other feeling than contempt; but, now, that he presumed to avow opinions in opposition to his, and even to turn upon him with a lofty tone and an air of superiority, he began to hate him. Conscious that, in the vilest and most worthless sense of the term, he was dependent upon the weak young lord, Sir Mulberry could the less brook humiliation at his hands; and when he began to dislike him he measured his dislike — as men often do — by the extent of the injuries he had inflicted upon its object. When it is remembered that Sir Mulberry Hawk had plundered, duped, deceived, and fooled his pupil in every possible way, it will not be wondered at, that, beginning to hate him, he began to hate him cordially.

On the other hand, the young lord having thought — which he very seldom did about anything — and seriously too, upon the affair with Nicholas, and the circumstances which led to it, had arrived at a manly and honest conclusion. Sir Mulberry's coarse and insulting behavior on the occasion in question had produced a deep impression on his mind; a strong suspicion of his having led him on to pursue Miss Nickleby for purposes of his own, had been lurking there, for some time; he was really ashamed of his share in the transaction, and deeply mortified by the misgiving that he had been gulled. He had had sufficient leisure to reflect upon these things, during their late retirement; and, at times, when his careless and indolent nature would permit, had availed himself of the opportunity. Slight circumstances, too, had occurred to increase his suspicion. It wanted but a very slight circumstance to kindle his wrath against Sir Mulberry. This his disdainful and insolent tone in their recent conversation (the only one they had held upon the subject since the period to which Sir Mulberry referred) effected.

Thus they rejoined their friends: each with causes of dislike against the other, rankling in his breast; and the young man haunted, besides, with thoughts of the vindictive retaliation which was threatened against Nicholas, and the determination to prevent it by some strong step, if possible. But this was not all. Sir Mulberry, conceiving that he had silenced him effectually, could not suppress his triumph, or forbear from following up what he conceived to be his advantage. Mr. Pyke was there, and Mr. Pluck was there, and Colonel Chouser, and other gentlemen of the same caste, and it was a great point for Sir Mulberry to show them that he had not lost his influence. At first, the young lord contented himself with a silent determination to take measures for withdrawing himself from the connection immediately. By degrees, he grew more angry, and was exasperated by jests and familiarities which, a few hours before, would have been a source of amusement to him. This did not serve him; for, at such bantering or retort as suited the company, he was no match for Sir Mulberry. Still, no violent rupture took place. They returned to town; Messrs. Pyke and Pluck and other gentlemen frequently protesting on the way thither, that Sir Mulberry had never been in such tiptop spirits in all his life.

They dined together, sumptuously. The wine flowed freely, as indeed it had done all day. Sir Mulberry drank to recompense himself for his recent abstinence; the young lord, to drown his indignation; and the remainder of the party, because the wine was of the best and they had nothing to pay. It was nearly midnight when they rushed out, wild, burning with wine, their blood boiling, and their brains on fire, to the gaming-table.

Here, they encountered another party, mad like themselves. The excitement of play, hot rooms, and glaring lights was not calculated to allay the fever of the time. In that giddy whirl of noise and confusion, the men were delirious. Who thought of money, ruin, or the morrow, in the savage intoxication of the moment? More wine was called for, glass after glass was drained, their parched and scalding mouths were cracked with thirst. Down poured the wine like oil on blazing fire. And still the riot went on. The debauchery gained its height; glasses were dashed upon the floor by hands that could not carry them to lips; oaths were shouted out by lips which could scarcely form the words to vent them in; drunken losers cursed and roared; some mounted on the tables, waving bottles above their heads, and bidding defiance to the rest; some danced, some sung, some tore the cards and raved. Tumult and frenzy reigned supreme; when a noise arose that drowned all others, and two men, seizing each other by the throat, struggled into the middle of the room.

A dozen voices, until now unheard, called aloud to part them. Those who had kept themselves cool, to win, and who earned their living in such scenes, threw themselves upon the combatants, and, forcing them asunder, dragged them some space apart.

"Let me go!" cried Sir Mulberry, in a thick hoarse voice; "he struck me! Do you hear? I say, he struck me. Have I a friend here? Who is this? Westwood. Do you hear me say he struck me!"

"I hear, I hear," replied one of those who held him. "Come away, for to-night!"

"I will not, by G—," he replied. "A dozen men about us saw the blow."

"To-morrow will be ample time," said the friend.

"It will not be ample time!" cried Sir Mulberry. "To-night — at once — here!" His passion was so great, that he could not articulate, but stood clinching his fist, tearing his hair, and stamping upon the ground.

"What is this, my lord?" said one of those who surrounded him. "Have blows passed?"

"*One* blow has," was the panting reply. "I struck him — I proclaim it to all here! I struck him, and he knows why. I say, with him, let this quarrel be adjusted now. Captain Adams," said the young lord, looking hurriedly about him, and addressing one of those who had interposed, "Let me speak with you, I beg."

The person addressed, stepped forward, and, taking the young man's arm, they retired together, followed shortly afterwards by Sir Mulberry and his friend.

It was a profligate haunt, of the worst repute, and not a place in which such an affair was likely to awaken any sympathy for either party, or to call forth any further remonstrance or interposition. Elsewhere, its further progress would have been instantly prevented, and time allowed for sober and cool reflection; but not there. Disturbed in their orgies, the party broke up; some reeled away with looks of tipsy gravity; others withdrew noisily discussing what had just occurred; the gentlemen of honor who lived upon their winnings remarked to each other, as they went out, that Hawk was a good shot; and those who had been most noisy, fell fast asleep upon the sofas, and thought no more about it.

Meanwhile, the two seconds, as they may be called now, after a long conference, each with his principal, met together in another room. Both utterly heartless, both men upon town, both thoroughly initiated in its

worst vices, both deeply in debt, both fallen from some higher estate, both addicted to every depravity for which society can find some genteel name and plead its most depraving conventionalities as an excuse, they were naturally gentlemen of most unblemished honor themselves, and of great nicety concerning the honor of other people.

These two gentlemen were unusually cheerful, just now; for the affair was pretty certain to make some noise, and could scarcely fail to enhance their reputations.

"This is an awkward affair, Adams," said Mr. Westwood, drawing himself up.

"Very," returned the captain; "a blow has been struck, and there is but one course, *of* course."

"No apology, I suppose?" said Mr. Westwood.

"Not a syllable, sir, from my man, if we talk till doomsday," returned the captain. "The original cause of dispute, I understand, was some girl or other, to whom your principal applied certain terms, which Lord Frederick, defending the girl, repelled. But this led to a long recrimination upon a great many sore subjects, charges, and counter-charges. Sir Mulberry was sarcastic; Lord Frederick was excited, and struck him in the heat of provocation, and under circumstances of great aggravation. That blow, unless there is a full retraction on the part of Sir Mulberry, Lord Frederick is ready to justify."

"There is no more to be said," returned the other, "but to settle the hour and the place of meeting. It's a responsibility; but there is a strong feeling to have it over. Do you object to say at sunrise?"

"Sharp work," replied the captain, referring to his

watch; "however, as this seems to have been a long time breeding, and negotiation is only a waste of words — no."

"Something may possibly be said, out of doors, after what passed in the other room, which renders it desirable that we should be off without delay, and quite clear of town," said Mr. Westwood. "What do you say to one of the meadows opposite Twickenham, by the riverside?"

The captain saw no objection.

"Shall we join company in the avenue of trees which leads from Petersham to Ham House, and settle the exact spot when we arrive there?" said Mr. Westwood.

To this the captain also assented. After a few other preliminaries, equally brief — and having settled the road each party should take to avoid suspicion — they separated.

"We shall just have comfortable time, my lord," said the captain, when he had communicated the arrangements, "to call at my rooms for a case of pistols, and then jog coolly down. If you will allow me to dismiss your servant, we'll take my cab; for yours, perhaps, might be recognized."

What a contrast, when they reached the street, to the scene they had just left! It was already daybreak. For the flaring yellow light within, was substituted the clear, bright, glorious morning; for a hot, close atmosphere, tainted with the smell of expiring lamps, and reeking with the steams of riot and dissipation, the free, fresh, wholesome air. But to the fevered head on which that cool air blew, it seemed to come laden with remorse for time misspent and countless opportunities neglected. With throbbing veins and burning skin, eyes wild and

heavy, thoughts hurried and disordered, he felt as though the light were a reproach, and shrunk involuntarily from the day as if he were some foul and hideous thing.

"Shivering?" said the captain. "You are cold."

"Rather."

"It does strike cool, coming out of those hot rooms. Wrap that cloak about you. So, so; now we're off."

They rattled through the quiet streets, made their call at the captain's lodgings, cleared the town, and emerged upon the open road, without hinderance or molestation.

Fields, trees, gardens, hedges, everything looked very beautiful; the young man scarcely seemed to have noticed them before, though he had passed the same objects a thousand times. There was a peace and serenity upon them all, strangely at variance with the bewilderment and confusion of his own half-sobered thoughts, and yet impressive and welcome. He had no fear upon his mind; but, as he looked about him, he had less anger; and though all old delusions, relative to his worthless late companion, were now cleared away, he rather wished he had never known him than thought of its having come to this.

The past night, the day before, and many other days and nights beside, all mingled themselves up in one unintelligible and senseless whirl; he could not separate the transactions of one time from those of another. Now, the noise of the wheels resolved itself into some wild tune in which he could recognize scraps of airs he knew; now, there was nothing in his ears but a stunning and bewildering sound, like rushing water. But his companion rallied him on being so silent, and they talked and laughed boisterously. When they stopped, he was a little surprised to find himself in the act of

smoking; but, on reflection, he remembered when and where he had taken the cigar.

They stopped at the avenue gate and alighted, leaving the carriage to the care of the servant, who was a smart fellow, and nearly as well accustomed to such proceedings as his master. Sir Mulberry and his friend were already there. All four walked in profound silence, up the aisle of stately elm-trees, which, meeting far above their heads, formed a long green perspective of Gothic arches, terminating, like some old ruin, in the open sky.

After a pause, and a brief conference between the seconds, they, at length, turned to the right, and taking a track across a little meadow, passed Ham House and came into some fields beyond. In one of these, they stopped. The ground was measured, some usual forms gone through, the two principals were placed front to front at the distance agreed upon, and Sir Mulberry turned his face towards his young adversary for the first time. He was very pale — his eyes were bloodshot, his dress disordered, and his hair dishevelled, — all, most probably, the consequences of the previous day and night. For the face, it expressed nothing but violent and evil passions. He shaded his eyes with his hand; gazed at his opponent, steadfastly, for a few moments; and, then taking the weapon which was tendered to him, bent his eyes upon that, and looked up no more until the word was given, when he instantly fired.

The two shots were fired, as nearly as possible, at the same instant. In that instant, the young lord turned his head sharply round, fixed upon his adversary a ghastly stare, and, without a groan or stagger, fell down dead.

"He's gone!" cried Westwood, who, with the other second, had run up to the body, and fallen on one knee beside it.

"His blood on his own head," said Sir Mulberry, "He brought this upon himself, and forced it upon me."

"Captain Adams," cried Westwood, hastily, "I call you to witness that this was fairly done. Hawk, we have not a moment to lose. We must leave this place immediately, push for Brighton, and cross to France with all speed. This has been a bad business, and may be worse, if we delay a moment. Adams, consult your own safety, and don't remain here; the living before the dead — good-by!"

With these words, he seized Sir Mulberry by the arm, and hurried him away. Captain Adams — only pausing to convince himself, beyond all question, of the fatal result — sped off in the same direction, to concert measures with his servant for removing the body, and securing his own safety likewise.

So died Lord Frederick Verisopht, by the hand which he had loaded with gifts, and clasped a thousand times; by the act of him, but for whom, and others like him, he might have lived a happy man, and died with children's faces round his bed.

The sun came proudly up in all his majesty, the noble river ran its winding course, the leaves quivered and rustled in the air, the birds poured their cheerful songs from every tree, the short-lived butterfly fluttered its little wings; all the light and life of day came on; and, amidst it all, and pressing down the grass whose every blade bore twenty tiny lives, lay the dead man, with his stark and rigid face turned upwards to the sky.

CHAPTER LI.

THE PROJECT OF MR. RALPH NICKLEBY AND HIS FRIEND APPROACHING A SUCCESSFUL ISSUE, BECOMES UNEXPECTEDLY KNOWN TO ANOTHER PARTY, NOT ADMITTED INTO THEIR CONFIDENCE.

In an old house, dismal dark and dusty, which seemed to have withered, like himself, and to have grown yellow and shrivelled in hoarding him from the light of day, as he had, in hoarding his money, lived Arthur Gride. Meagre old chairs and tables, of spare and bony make, and hard and cold as misers' hearts, were ranged, in grim array, against the gloomy walls; attenuated presses, grown lank and lantern-jawed in guarding the treasures they enclosed, and tottering, as though, from constant fear and dread of thieves, shrunk up in dark corners, whence they cast no shadows on the ground, and seemed to hide and cower from observation. A tall grim clock upon the stairs, with long lean hands and famished face, ticked in cautious whispers; and when it struck the time, in thin and piping sounds, like an old man's voice, rattled, as if 'twere pinched with hunger.

No fireside couch was there, to invite repose and comfort. Elbow-chairs there were, but they looked uneasy in their minds, cocked their arms suspiciously and timidly, and kept upon their guard. Others, were fantasti-

cally grim and gaunt, as having drawn themselves up to their utmost height, and put on their fiercest looks to stare all comers out of countenance. Others, again, knocked up against their neighbors, or leaned for support against the wall — somewhat ostentatiously, as if to call all men to witness that they were not worth the taking. The dark square lumbering bedsteads seemed built for restless dreams ; the musty hangings seemed to creep in scanty folds together, whispering among themselves, when rustled by the wind, their trembling knowledge of the tempting wares that lurked within the dark and tight-locked closets.

From out the most spare and hungry room in all this spare and hungry house there came, one morning, the tremulous tones of old Gride's voice, as it feebly chirruped forth the fag-end of some forgotten song, of which the burden ran

> Ta — ran — tan — too,
> Throw the old shoe,
> And may the wedding be lucky!

which he repeated, in the same shrill quavering notes, again and again, until a violent fit of coughing obliged him to desist, and to pursue, in silence, the occupation upon which he was engaged.

This occupation was, to take down from the shelves of a worm-eaten wardrobe, a quantity of frowzy garments, one by one ; to subject each to a careful and minute inspection by holding it up against the light, and after folding it with great exactness, to lay it on one or other of two little heaps beside him. He never took two articles of clothing out together, but always brought them forth, singly : and never failed to shut the wardrobe door, and turn the key, between each visit to its shelves.

"The snuff-colored suit," said Arthur Gride, surveying a threadbare coat. "Did I look well in snuff-color? let me think."

The result of his cogitations appeared to be unfavorable, for he folded the garment once more, laid it aside, and mounted on a chair to get down another: chirping while he did so —

> Young, loving, and fair,
> Oh what happiness there!
> The wedding is sure to be lucky!

"They always put in 'young,'" said old Arthur, "but songs are only written for the sake of rhyme, and this is a silly one that the poor country people sung, when I was a little boy. Though stop — young is quite right too — it means the bride — yes. He, he, he! It means the bride. Oh dear, that's good. That's very good. And true besides — quite true!"

In the satisfaction of this discovery, he went over the verse again, with increased expression, and a shake or two here and there. He then resumed his employment.

"The bottle-green," said old Arthur; "the bottle-green was a famous suit to wear, and I bought it very cheap at a pawnbroker's and there was — he, he, he! — a tarnished shilling in the waistcoat-pocket. To think that the pawnbroker shouldn't have known there was a shilling in it! *I* knew it! I felt it when I was examining the quality. Oh, what a dull dog! It was a lucky suit too, this bottle-green. The very day I put it on first, old Lord Mallowford was burnt to death in his bed, and all the post-obits fell in. I'll be married in the bottle-green. Peg — Peg Sliderskew — I'll wear the bottle-green!"

This call, loudly repeated twice or thrice at the room-

door, brought into the apartment a short, thin, weazen, blear-eyed old woman, palsy-stricken and hideously ugly, who, wiping her shrivelled face upon her dirty apron, inquired, in that subdued tone in which deaf people commonly speak: —

"Was that you a-calling, or only the clock a-striking? My hearing gets so bad, I never know which is which; but when I hear a noise, I know it must be one of you, because nothing else never stirs in the house."

"Me, Peg — me," said Arthur Gride, tapping himself on the breast to render the reply more intelligible.

"You, eh?" returned Peg. "And what do *you* want?"

"I'll be married in the bottle-green," cried Arthur Gride.

"It's a deal too good to be married in, master," rejoined Peg, after a short inspection of the suit. "Haven't you got anything worse than this?"

"Nothing that'll do," replied old Arthur.

"Why not do?" retorted Peg. "Why don't you wear your every-day clothes, like a man — eh?"

"They a'n't becoming enough, Peg," returned her master.

"Not what enough?" said Peg.

Becoming."

"Becoming what?" said Peg, sharply. "Not becoming too old to wear?"

Arthur Gride muttered an imprecation on his housekeeper's deafness, as he roared in her ear: —

"Not smart enough! I want to look as well as I can."

"Look?" cried Peg. "If she's as handsome as you say she is, she won't look much at you, master, take your oath of that; and as to how you look yourself — pep-

per-and-salt, bottle-green, sky-blue, or tartan-plaid will make no difference in you."

With which consolatory assurance, Peg Sliderskew gathered up the chosen suit, and folding her skinny arms upon the bundle, stood, mouthing, and grinning, and blinking her watery eyes, like an uncouth figure in some monstrous piece of carving.

"You're in a funny humor, a'n't you, Peg?" said Arthur, with not the best possible grace.

"Why, isn't it enough to make me?" rejoined the old woman. "I shall, soon enough, be put out, though, if anybody tries to domineer it over me: and so I give you notice, master. Nobody shall be put over Peg Sliderskew's head, after so many years; you know that, and so I needn't tell you! That won't do for me — no, no, nor for you. Try that once, and come to ruin — ruin — ruin!"

"Oh dear, dear, I shall never try it," said Arthur Gride, appalled by the mention of the word, "not for the world. It would be very easy to ruin me; we must be very careful; more saving than ever, with another mouth to feed. Only we — we mustn't let her lose her good looks, Peg, because I like to see 'em."

"Take care you don't find good looks come expensive," returned Peg, shaking her forefinger.

"But she can earn money herself, Peg," said Arthur Gride, eagerly watching what effect his communication produced upon the old woman's countenance: "she can draw, paint, work all manner of pretty things for ornamenting stools and chairs: slippers, Peg, watch-guards, hair-chains, and a thousand little dainty trifles that I couldn't give you half the names of. Then she can play the piano, (and, what's more, she's got one,) and sing

like a little bird. She'll be very cheap to dress and keep, Peg; don't you think she will?"

"If you don't let her make a fool of you, she may," returned Peg.

"A fool of *me!*" exclaimed Arthur. "Trust your old master not to be fooled by pretty faces, Peg; no, no, no — nor by ugly ones neither, Mrs. Sliderskew," he softly added by way of soliloquy.

"You're a-saying something you don't want me to hear," said Peg; "I know you are."

"Oh dear! the devil's in this woman," muttered Arthur; adding with an ugly leer, "I said I trusted everything to you, Peg. That was all."

"You do that, master, and all your cares are over," said Peg approvingly.

"*When* I do that, Peg Sliderskew," thought Arthur Gride, "they will be."

Although he thought this, very distinctly, he durst not move his lips lest the old woman should detect him. He even seemed half afraid that she might have read his thoughts; for he leered coaxingly upon her, as he said aloud: —

"Take up all loose stitches in the bottle-green with the best black silk. Have a skein of the best, and some new buttons for the coat, and — this is a good idea, Peg, and one you'll like, I know — as I have never given her anything yet, and girls like such attentions, you shall polish up a sparkling necklace that I have got up-stairs, and I'll give it her upon the wedding morning — clasp it round her charming little neck myself — and take it away again next day. He, he, he! — lock it up for her, Peg, and lose it. Who'll be made the fool of there, I wonder, to begin with — eh Peg?"

Mrs. Sliderskew appeared to approve highly of this ingenious scheme, and expressed her satisfaction by various rackings and twitchings of her head and body, which by no means enhanced her charms. These she prolonged until she had hobbled to the door, when she exchanged them for a sour malignant look, and twisting her under-jaw from side to side, muttered hearty curses upon the future Mrs. Gride, as she crept slowly down the stairs, and paused for breath at nearly every one.

"She's half a witch, I think," said Arthur Gride, when he found himself again alone. "But she's very frugal, and she's very deaf. Her living costs me next to nothing; and it's no use her listening at key-holes; for she can't hear. She's a charming woman — for the purpose; a most discreet old house-keeper, and worth her weight in — copper."

Having extolled the merits of his domestic in these high terms, old Arthur went back to the burden of his song. The suit destined to grace his approaching nuptials being now selected, he replaced the others with no less care than he had displayed in drawing them from the musty nooks where they had silently reposed for many years.

Startled by a ring at the door, he hastily concluded this operation, and locked the press; but, there was no need for any particular hurry, as the discreet Peg seldom knew the bell was rung unless she happened to cast her dim eyes upwards, and to see it shaking against the kitchen-ceiling. After a short delay, however, Peg tottered in, followed by Newman Noggs.

"Ah! Mr. Noggs!" cried Arthur Gride, rubbing his hands. "My good friend, Mr. Noggs, what news do you bring for me?"

Newman, with a steadfast and immovable aspect, and his fixed eye very fixed indeed, replied, suiting the action to the word, "A letter. From Mr. Nickleby. Bearer waits."

"Won't you take a — a" —

Newman looked up, and smacked his lips.

— "A chair?" said Arthur Gride.

"No," replied Newman. "Thank 'ee."

Arthur opened the letter, with trembling hands, and devoured its contents with the utmost greediness: chuckling rapturously over it, and reading it several times, before he could take it from before his eyes. So many times did he peruse and re-peruse it, that Newman considered it expedient to remind him of his presence.

"Answer," said Newman. "Bearer waits."

"True," replied old Arthur. "Yes — yes; I almost forgot, I do declare."

"I thought you were forgetting," said Newman.

"Quite right to remind me, Mr. Noggs. Oh, very right indeed," said Arthur. "Yes. I'll write a line. I'm — I'm — rather flurried, Mr. Noggs. The news is" —

"Bad?" interrupted Newman.

"No, Mr. Noggs, thank you; good, good. The very best of news. Sit down. I'll get the pen and ink, and write a line in answer. I'll not detain you long. I know you're a treasure to your master, Mr. Noggs. He speaks of you in such terms, sometimes, that, oh dear! you'd be astonished. I may say that I do too, and always did. I always say the same of you."

"That's 'Curse Mr. Noggs with all my heart!' then, if you do," thought Newman, as Gride hurried out.

The letter had fallen on the ground. Looking care-

fully about him, for an instant, Newman, impelled by curiosity to know the result of the design he had overheard from his office-closet, caught it up and rapidly read as follows: —

"Gride,

"I saw Bray again this morning, and proposed the day after to-morrow (as you suggested) for the marriage. There is no objection on his part, and all days are alike to his daughter. We will go together, and you must be with me by seven in the morning. I need not tell you to be punctual.

"Make no further visits to the girl, in the mean time. You have been there, of late, much oftener than you should. She does not languish for you, and it might have been dangerous. Restrain your youthful ardor for eight-and-forty hours, and leave her to the father. You only undo what he does, and does well.

"Yours,

"Ralph Nickleby."

A footstep was heard without. Newman dropped the letter on the same spot again, pressed it with his foot to prevent its fluttering away, regained his seat in a single stride, and looked as vacant and unconscious as ever mortal looked. Arthur Gride, after peering nervously about him, spied it on the ground, picked it up, and sitting down to write, glanced at Newman Noggs, who was staring at the wall with an intensity so remarkable, that Arthur was quite alarmed.

"Do you see anything particular, Mr. Noggs?" said Arthur, trying to follow the direction of Newman's eyes — which was an impossibility, and a thing no man had ever done.

"Only a cobweb," replied Newman.

"Oh! is that all?"

"No," said Newman. "There's a fly in it."

"There are a good many cobwebs here," observed Arthur Gride.

"So there are in our place," returned Newman; "and flies too."

Newman appeared to derive great entertainment from this repartee, and to the great discomposure of Arthur Gride's nerves, produced a series of sharp cracks from his finger-joints, resembling the noise of a distant discharge of small artillery. Arthur succeeded in finishing his reply to Ralph's note, nevertheless, and at length handed it over to the eccentric messenger for delivery.

"That's it, Mr. Noggs," said Gride.

Newman gave a nod, put it in his hat, and was shuffling away, when Gride, whose doting delight knew no bounds, beckoned him back again, and said, in a shrill whisper, and with a grin which puckered up his whole face, and almost obscured his eyes:

"Will you — will you take a little drop of something — just a taste?"

In good fellowship (if Arthur Gride had been capable of it) Newman would not have drunk with him one bubble of the richest wine that was ever made; but to see what he would be at, and to punish him as much as he could, he accepted the offer immediately.

Arthur Gride, therefore, again applied himself to the press, and from a shelf laden with tall Flemish drinking-glasses, and quaint bottles: some with necks like so many storks, and others with square Dutch-built bodies and short fat apoplectic throats: took down one dusty bottle of promising appearance, and two glasses of curiously small size.

"You never tasted this," said Arthur. "It's *eau-d'or* — golden water. I like it on account of its name. It's a delicious name. Water of gold, golden water! O dear me, it seems quite a sin to drink it!"

As his courage appeared to be fast failing him, and he trifled with the stopper in a manner which threatened the dismissal of the bottle to its old place, Newman took up one of the little glasses, and clinked it, twice or thrice, against the bottle, as a gentle reminder that he had not been helped yet. With a deep sigh, Arthur Gride slowly filled it — though not to the brim — and then filled his own.

"Stop, stop; don't drink it yet," he said, laying his hand on Newman's; "it was given to me, twenty years ago, and when I take a little taste, which is ve — ry seldom, I like to think of it beforehand, and teaze myself. We'll drink a toast. Shall we drink a toast, Mr. Noggs?"

"Ah!" said Newman, eying his little glass impatiently. "Look sharp. Bearer waits."

"Why, then, I'll tell you what," tittered Arthur, "we'll drink — he, he, he! — we'll drink a lady."

"*The* ladies?" said Newman.

"No, no, Mr. Noggs," replied Gride, arresting his hand, "*a* lady. You wonder to hear me say *a* lady — I know you do, I know you do. Here's little Madeline — that's the toast, Mr. Noggs — little Madeline!"

"Madeline!" said Newman; inwardly adding, "and God help her!"

The rapidity and unconcern with which Newman dismissed his portion of the golden water, had a great effect upon the old man, who sat upright in his chair, and gazed at him, open-mouthed, as if the sight had

taken away his breath. Quite unmoved, however, Newman left him to sip his own, at leisure, or to pour it back again into the bottle, if he chose, and departed; after greatly outraging the dignity of Peg Sliderskew by brushing past her, in the passage, without a word of apology or recognition.

Mr. Gride and his house-keeper, immediately on being left alone, resolved themselves into a committee of ways and means, and discussed the arrangements which should be made for the reception of the young bride. As they were, like some other committees, extremely dull and prolix in debate, this history may pursue the footsteps of Newman Noggs; thereby combining advantage with necessity; for it would have been necessary to do so under any circumstances, and necessity has no law, as all the world know.

"You've been a long time," said Ralph, when Newman returned.

"*He* was a long time," replied Newman.

"Bah!" cried Ralph impatiently. "Give me his note, if he gave you one: his message, if he didn't. And don't go away. I want a word with you, sir."

Newman handed in the note, and looked very virtuous and innocent while his employer broke the seal, and glanced his eye over it.

"He'll be sure to come!" muttered Ralph, as he tore it to pieces; "why of course, I know he'll be sure to come. What need to say that? Noggs! Pray sir, what man was that, with whom I saw you in the street last night?"

"I don't know," replied Newman.

"You had better refresh your memory, sir," said Ralph, with a threatening look.

"I tell you," returned Newman boldly, "that I don't know. He came here twice, and asked for you. You were out. He came again. You packed him off, yourself. He gave the name of Brooker."

"I know he did," said Ralph; "What then?"

"What then? Why, then he lurked about and dogged me in the street. He follows me, night after night, and urges me to bring him face to face with you; as he says he has been once, and not long ago either. He wants to see you face to face, he says, and you'll soon hear him out, he warrants."

"And what say you to that?" inquired Ralph, looking keenly at his drudge.

"That it's no business of mine, and I won't. I told him he might catch you in the street, if that was all he wanted, but no! that wouldn't do. You wouldn't hear a word there, he said. He must have you, alone in a room with the door locked, where he could speak without fear, and you'd soon change your tone, and hear him patiently."

"An audacious dog!" Ralph muttered.

"That's all I know," said Newman. "I say again, I don't know what man he is. I don't believe he knows himself. You have seen him; perhaps *you* do."

"I think I do," replied Ralph.

"Well," retorted Newman, sulkily, "don't expect me to know him too; that's all. You'll ask me, next, why I never told you this, before. What would you say, if I was to tell you all that people say of you? What do you call me when I sometimes do? 'Brute, ass!' and snap at me like a dragon."

This was true enough; though the question which

Newman anticipated, was, in fact, upon Ralph's lips at the moment.

"He is an idle ruffian," said Ralph; "a vagabond from beyond the sea where he travelled for his crimes; a felon let loose to run his neck into the halter; a swindler, who has the audacity to try his schemes on me who know him well. The next time he tampers with you, hand him over to the police, for attempting to extort money by lies and threats,—d'ye hear?—and leave the rest to me. He shall cool his heels in jail, a little time, and I'll be bound he looks for other folks to fleece, when he comes out. You mind what I say, do you?"

"I hear," said Newman.

"Do it then," returned Ralph, "and I'll reward you. Now, you may go."

Newman readily availed himself of the permission, and, shutting himself up in his little office, remained there, in very serious cogitation, all day. When he was released at night, he proceeded, with all the expedition he could use, to the City, and took up his old position behind the pump, to watch for Nicholas — for Newman Noggs was proud in his way, and could not bear to appear as his friend, before the brothers Cheeryble, in the shabby and degraded state to which he was reduced.

He had not occupied this position many minutes, when he was rejoiced to see Nicholas approaching, and darted out from his ambuscade to meet him. Nicholas, on his part, was no less pleased to encounter his friend, whom he had not seen for some time; so, their greeting was a warm one.

"I was thinking of you, at that moment," said Nicholas.

"That's right," rejoined Newman, "and I of you. I

couldn't help coming up, to-night. I say, I think I'm going to find out something."

"And what may that be?" returned Nicholas, smiling at this odd communication.

"I don't know what it may be, I don't know what it may not be," said Newman; "it's some secret in which your uncle is concerned, but what, I've not yet been able to discover, although I have my strong suspicions. I'll not hint 'em now, in case you should be disappointed."

"*I* disappointed!" cried Nicholas; "am I interested?"

"I think you are," replied Newman. "I have a crotchet in my head that it must be so. I have found out a man, who plainly knows more than he cares to tell at once. And he has already dropped such hints to me as puzzle me — I say, as puzzle me," said Newman, scratching his red nose into a state of violent inflammation, and staring at Nicholas with all his might and main meanwhile.

Admiring what could have wound his friend up to such a pitch of mystery, Nicholas endeavored, by a series of questions, to elucidate the cause; but in vain. Newman could not be drawn into any more explicit statement, than a repetition of the perplexities he had already thrown out, and a confused oration, showing, How it was necessary to use the utmost caution; how the lynx-eyed Ralph had already seen him in company with his unknown correspondent; and how he had baffled the said Ralph by extreme guardedness of manner and ingenuity of speech: having prepared himself for such a contingency from the first.

Remembering his companion's propensity, — of which

his nose, indeed, perpetually warned all beholders like a beacon, — Nicholas had drawn him into a sequestered tavern. Here, they fell to reviewing the origin and progress of their acquaintance, as men sometimes do, and tracing out the little events by which it was most strongly marked, came at last to Miss Cecilia Bobster.

"And that reminds me," said Newman, "that you never told me the young lady's real name."

"Madeline!" said Nicholas.

"Madeline!" cried Newman; "what Madeline? Her other name — say her other name."

"Bray," said Nicholas, in great astonishment.

"It's the same!" cried Newman. "Sad story! Can you stand idly by, and let that unnatural marriage take place without one attempt to save her?"

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Nicholas, starting up; "marriage! are you mad?"

"Are you? is she? are you blind, deaf, senseless, dead?" said Newman. "Do you know that within one day, by means of your uncle Ralph, she will be married to a man as bad as he, and worse, if worse there is? Do you know that, within one day, she will be sacrificed, as sure as you stand there alive, to a hoary wretch — a devil born and bred, and gray in devils' ways?"

"Be careful what you say," replied Nicholas. "For Heaven's sake be careful! I am left here alone, and those who could stretch out a hand to rescue her, are far away. What is it that you mean?"

"I never heard her name," said Newman, choking with his energy. "Why didn't you tell me? How was I to know? We might, at least, have had some time to think!"

"What is it that you mean?" cried Nicholas.

It was not an easy task to arrive at this information; but, after a great quantity of extraordinary pantomime, which in no way assisted it, Nicholas, who was almost as wild as Newman Noggs himself, forced the latter down upon his seat and held him down until he began his tale.

Rage, astonishment, indignation, and a storm of passions, rushed through the listener's heart, as the plot was laid bare. He no sooner understood it all, than with a face of ashy paleness, and trembling in every limb, he darted from the house.

"Stop him!" cried Newman, bolting out in pursuit. "He'll be doing something desperate — he'll murder somebody — hallo! there, stop him. Stop thief! stop thief!"

CHAPTER LII.

NICHOLAS DESPAIRS OF RESCUING MADELINE BRAY, BUT PLUCKS UP HIS SPIRITS AGAIN, AND DETERMINES TO ATTEMPT IT. DOMESTIC INTELLIGENCE OF THE KENWIGSES AND LILLYVICKS.

FINDING that Newman was determined to arrest his progress at any hazard, and apprehensive that some well-intentioned passenger attracted by the cry of "stop thief," might lay violent hands upon his person, and place him in a disagreeable predicament from which he might have some difficulty in extricating himself, Nicholas soon slackened his pace, and suffered Newman Noggs to come up with him: which he did, in so breathless a condition, that it seemed impossible he could have held out for a minute longer.

"I will go straight to Bray's," said Nicholas. "I will see this man. If there is a feeling of humanity lingering in his breast, a spark of consideration for his own child, motherless and friendless as she is, I will awaken it."

"You will not," replied Newman. "You will not, indeed."

"Then," said Nicholas, pressing onward, "I will act upon my first impulse, and go straight to Ralph Nickleby."

"By the time you reach his house he will be in bed," said Newman.

"I'll drag him from it," cried Nicholas.

"Tut, tut," said Noggs. "Be yourself."

"You are the best of friends to me, Newman," rejoined Nicholas after a pause, and taking his hand as he spoke. "I have made head against many trials; but the misery of another, and such misery, is involved in this one, that I declare to you I am rendered desperate, and know not how to act."

In truth, it did seem a hopeless case. It was impossible to make any use of such intelligence as Newman Noggs had gleaned, when he lay concealed in the closet. The mere circumstance of the compact between Ralph Nickleby and Gride would not invalidate the marriage, or render Bray averse to it, who, if he did not actually know of the existence of some such understanding, doubtless suspected it. What had been hinted with reference to some fraud on Madeline, had been put, with sufficient obscurity, by Arthur Gride, but coming from Newman Noggs, and obscured still further by the smoke of his pocket-pistol, it became wholly unintelligible, and involved in utter darkness.

"There seems no ray of hope," said Nicholas.

"The greater necessity for coolness, for reason, for consideration, for thought," said Newman, pausing at every alternate word, to look anxiously in his friend's face. "Where are the brothers?"

"Both absent on urgent business, as they will be for a week to come."

"Is there no way of communicating with them? no way of getting one of them here, by to-morrow night?"

"Impossible!" said Nicholas, "the sea is between us

and them. With the fairest winds that ever blew, to go and return would take three days and nights."

"Their nephew" — said Newman, "their old clerk."

"What could either do, that I cannot?" rejoined Nicholas. "With reference to them, especially, I am enjoined to the strictest silence on this subject. What right have I to betray the confidence reposed in me, when nothing but a miracle can prevent this sacrifice?"

"Think," urged Newman. "Is there no way?"

"There is none," said Nicholas, in utter dejection. "Not one. The father urges — the daughter consents. These demons have her in their toils; legal right, might, power, money, and every influence are on their side. How can I hope to save her?"

"Hope to the last!" said Newman clapping him on the back. "Always hope; that's a dear boy. Never leave off hoping; it don't answer. Do you mind me, Nick? it don't answer. Don't leave a stone unturned. It's always something, to know you've done the most you could. But, don't leave off hoping, or it's of no use doing anything. Hope, hope, to the last!"

Nicholas needed encouragement. The suddenness with which intelligence of the two usurers' plans had come upon him, the little time which remained for exertion, the probability, almost amounting to certainty itself, that a few hours would place Madeline Bray forever beyond his reach, consign her to unspeakable misery, and perhaps to an untimely death: all this quite stunned and overwhelmed him. Every hope connected with her that he had suffered himself to form, or had entertained unconsciously, seemed to fall at his feet, withered and dead. Every charm with which his memory or imagination had surrounded her, presented itself before him,

only to heighten his anguish and add new bitterness to his despair. Every feeling of sympathy for her forlorn condition, and of admiration for her heroism and fortitude, aggravated the indignation which shook him in every limb, and swelled his heart almost to bursting.

But, if Nicholas's own heart embarrassed him, Newman's came to his relief. There was so much earnestness in his remonstrance, and such sincerity and fervor in his manner, odd and ludicrous as it always was, that it imparted to Nicholas new firmness, and enabled him to say, after he had walked on for some little way in silence,

"You read me a good lesson, Newman, and I will profit by it. One step, at least, I may take — am bound to take indeed — and to that I will apply myself to-morrow."

"What is that?" asked Noggs wistfully. "Not to threaten Ralph? Not to see the father?"

"To see the daughter, Newman," replied Nicholas. "To do, what, after all, is the utmost that the brothers could do, if they were here, as Heaven send they were! To reason with her upon this hideous union, to point out to her all the horrors to which she is hastening; rashly, it may be, and without due reflection. To entreat her, at least, to pause. She can have had no counsellor for her good. Perhaps even I may move her so far yet, though it is the eleventh hour, and she upon the very brink of ruin."

"Bravely spoken!" said Newman. "Well done, well done! Yes. Very good."

"And I do declare," cried Nicholas, with honest enthusiasm, "that in this effort I am influenced by no selfish or personal considerations, but by pity for her, and

detestation and abhorrence of this scheme; and that I would do the same, were there twenty rivals in the field, and I the last and least favored of them all."

"You would, I believe," said Newman. "But where are you hurrying now?"

"Homewards," answered Nicholas. "Do you come with me, or shall I say good-night?"

"I'll come a little way, if you will but walk: not run," said Noggs.

"I cannot walk to-night, Newman," returned Nicholas, hurriedly. "I must move rapidly, or I could not draw my breath. I'll tell you what I've said and done to-morrow!"

Without waiting for a reply, he darted off at a rapid pace, and, plunging into the crowds which thronged the street, was quickly lost to view.

"He's a violent youth at times," said Newman, looking after him; "and yet I like him for it. There's cause enough now, or the deuse is in it. Hope! I *said* hope, I think! Ralph Nickleby and Gride with their heads together — and hope for the opposite party! Ho! ho!"

It was with a very melancholy laugh that Newman Noggs concluded this soliloquy; and it was with a very melancholy shake of the head, and a very rueful countenance, that he turned about, and went plodding on his way.

This, under ordinary circumstances, would have been to some small tavern or dram-shop; that being his way, in more senses than one. But, Newman was too much interested, and too anxious, to betake himself even to this resource, and so, with many desponding and dismal reflections, went straight home.

It had come to pass, that afternoon, that Miss Mor-

leena Kenwigs had received an invitation to repair next day, per steamer from Westminster Bridge, unto the Eel-pie Island at Twickenham: there to make merry upon a cold collation, bottled-beer, shrub, and shrimps, and to dance in the open air to the music of a locomotive band, conveyed thither for the purpose: the steamer being specially engaged by a dancing-master of extensive connection for the accommodation of his numerous pupils, and the pupils displaying their appreciation of the dancing-master's services, by purchasing themselves, and inducing their friends to do the like, divers light-blue tickets, entitling them to join the expedition. Of these light-blue tickets, one had been presented by an ambitious neighbor to Miss Morleena Kenwigs, with an invitation to join her daughters; and Mrs. Kenwigs, rightly deeming that the honor of the family was involved in Miss Morleena's making the most splendid appearance possible on so short a notice, and testifying to the dancing-master that there were other dancing-masters besides him, and to all fathers and mothers present that other people's children could learn to be genteel besides theirs, had fainted away, twice, under the magnitude of her preparations, but, upheld by a determination to sustain the family name or perish in the attempt, was still hard at work when Newman Noggs came home.

Now, between the italian-ironing of frills, the flouncing of trousers, the trimming of frocks, the faintings and the comings-to again, incidental to the occasion, Mrs. Kenwigs had been so entirely occupied, that she had not observed, until within half an hour before, that the flaxen tails of Miss Morleena's hair were, in a manner, run to seed; and that, unless she were put under the hands of a skilful hair-dresser, she never could achieve that signal

triumph over the daughters of all other people, anything less than which would be tantamount to defeat. This discovery drove Mrs. Kenwigs to despair; for the hair-dresser lived three streets and eight dangerous crossings off; Morleena could not be trusted to go there alone, even if such a proceeding were strictly proper: of which Mrs. Kenwigs had her doubts; Mr. Kenwigs had not returned from business; and there was nobody to take her. So, Mrs. Kenwigs first slapped Miss Kenwigs for being the cause of her vexation, and then shed tears.

"You ungrateful child!" said Mrs. Kenwigs, "after I have gone through what I have, this night, for your good."

"I can't help it, ma," replied Morleena, also in tears; "my hair *will* grow."

"Don't talk to me, you naughty thing!" said Mrs. Kenwigs, "don't! Even if I was to trust you by yourself and you were to escape being run over, I know you'd run in to Laura Chopkins," who was the daughter of the ambitious neighbor, "and tell her what you're going to wear to-morrow, I know you would. You've no proper pride in yourself, and are not to be trusted out of sight, for an instant."

Deploring the evil-mindedness of her eldest daughter, in these terms, Mrs. Kenwigs distilled fresh drops of vexation from her eyes, and declared that she did believe there never was anybody so tried as she was. Thereupon, Morleena Kenwigs wept afresh, and they bemoaned themselves together.

Matters were at this point, as Newman Noggs was heard to limp past the door on his way up-stairs; when Mrs. Kenwigs, gaining new hope from the sound of his footsteps, hastily removed from her countenance as many

traces of her late emotion as were effaceable on so short a notice : and presenting herself before him, and representing their dilemma, entreated that he would escort Morleena to the hair-dresser's shop.

" I wouldn't ask you, Mr. Noggs," said Mrs. Kenwigs, " if I didn't know what a good, kind-hearted creature you are — no, not for worlds. I am a weak constitution, Mr. Noggs, but my spirit would no more let me ask a favor where I thought there was a chance of its being refused, than it would let me submit to see my children trampled down and trod upon, by envy and lowness ! "

Newman was too good-natured not to have consented, even without this avowal of confidence on the part of Mrs. Kenwigs. Accordingly, a very few minutes had elapsed, when he and Miss Morleena were on their way to the hair-dresser's.

It was not exactly a hair-dresser's ; that is to say, people of a coarse and vulgar turn of mind might have called it a barber's ; for they not only cut and curled ladies elegantly, and children carefully, but shaved gentlemen easily. Still, it was a highly genteel establishment — quite first-rate in fact — and there were displayed in the window, besides other elegances, waxen busts of a light lady and a dark gentleman which were the admiration of the whole neighborhood. Indeed, some ladies had gone so far as to assert, that the dark gentleman was actually a portrait of the spirited young proprietor ; and the great similarity between their head-dresses — both wore very glossy hair, with a narrow walk straight down the middle, and a profusion of flat circular curls on both sides — encouraged the idea. The better informed among the sex, however, made light of this assertion, for however willing they were (and they

were very willing) to do full justice to the handsome face and figure of the proprietor, they held the countenance of the dark gentleman in the window to be an exquisite and abstract idea of masculine beauty, realized sometimes, perhaps, among angels and military men, but very rarely embodied to gladden the eyes of mortals.

It was to this establishment that Newman Noggs led Miss Kenwigs in safety. The proprietor, knowing that Miss Kenwigs had three sisters, each with two flaxen tails, and all good for sixpence apiece, once a month at least, promptly deserted an old gentleman whom he had just lathered for shaving, and handing him over to the journeyman, (who was not very popular among the ladies, by reason of his obesity and middle age) waited on the young lady himself.

Just as this change had been effected, there presented himself for shaving, a big, burly, good-humored coal-heaver with a pipe in his mouth, who, drawing his hand across his chin, requested to know when a shaver would be disengaged.

The journeyman to whom this question was put, looked doubtfully at the young proprietor, and the young proprietor looked scornfully at the coal-heaver: observing at the same time, —

"You won't get shaved here, my man."

"Why not?" said the coal-heaver.

"We don't shave gentlemen in your line," remarked the young proprietor.

"Why, I see you a-shaving of a baker, when I was a-looking through the winder, last week," said the coal-heaver.

"It's necessary to draw the line somewheres, my fine feller," replied the principal. "We draw the line there.

We can't go beyond bakers. If we was to get any lower than bakers, our customers would desert us, and we might shut up shop. You must try some other establishment, sir. We couldn't do it here."

The applicant stared; grinned at Newman Noggs, who appeared highly entertained; looked slightly round the shop, as if in depreciation of the pomatum pots and other articles of stock; took his pipe out of his mouth and gave a very loud whistle; and then put it in again, and walked out.

The old gentleman who had just been lathered, and who was sitting in a melancholy manner with his face turned towards the wall, appeared quite unconscious of this incident, and to be insensible to everything around him in the depth of a reverie — a very mournful one, to judge from the sighs he occasionally vented — in which he was absorbed. Affected by this example, the proprietor began to clip Miss Kenwigs, the journeyman to scrape the old gentleman, and Newman Noggs to read last Sunday's paper, all three in silence: when Miss Kenwigs uttered a shrill little scream, and Newman, raising his eyes, saw that it had been elicited by the circumstance of the old gentleman turning his head, and disclosing the features of Mr. Lillyvick the collector.

The features of Mr. Lillyvick they were, but strangely altered. If ever an old gentleman had made a point of appearing in public, shaved close and clean, that old gentleman was Mr. Lillyvick. If ever a collector had borne himself like a collector, and assumed, before all men, a solemn and portentous dignity as if he had the world on his books and it was all two quarters in arrear, that collector was Mr. Lillyvick. And now, there he sat, with the remains of a beard at least a week old, en-

cumbering his chin; a soiled and crumpled shirt-frill crouching, as it were, upon his breast, instead of standing boldly out; a demeanor so abashed and drooping, so despondent, and expressive of such humiliation, grief, and shame; that if the souls of forty unsubstantial house-keepers, all of whom had had their water cut off for non-payment of the rate, could have been concentrated in one body, that one body could hardly have expressed such mortification and defeat as were now expressed in the person of Mr. Lillyvick the collector.

Newman Noggs uttered his name, and Mr. Lillyvick groaned: then coughed to hide it. But the groan was a full-sized groan, and the cough was but a wheeze.

"Is anything the matter?" said Newman Noggs.

"Matter, sir!" cried Mr. Lillyvick. "The plug of life is dry, sir, and but the mud is left."

This speech — the style of which Newman attributed to Mr. Lillyvick's recent association with theatrical characters — not being quite explanatory, Newman looked as if he were about to ask another question, when Mr. Lillyvick prevented him by shaking his hand mournfully, and then waving his own.

"Let me be shaved!" said Mr. Lillyvick. "It shall be done before Morleena — it *is* Morleena, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Newman.

"Kenwigses have got a boy, haven't they?" inquired the collector.

Again Newman said "Yes."

"Is it a nice boy?" demanded the collector.

"It a'n't a very nasty one," returned Newman, rather embarrassed by the question.

"Susan Kenwigs used to say," observed the collector,

"that if ever she had another boy, she hoped it might be like me. Is this one like me, Mr. Noggs?"

This was a puzzling inquiry; but Newman evaded it, by replying to Mr. Lillyvick, that he thought the baby might possibly come like him in time.

"I should be glad to have somebody like me, somehow," said Mr. Lillyvick, "before I die."

"You don't mean to do that, yet awhile?" said Newman.

Unto which Mr. Lillyvick replied in a solemn voice, "Let me be shaved!" and again consigning himself to the hands of the journeyman, said no more.

This was remarkable behavior. So remarkable did it seem to Miss Morleena, that that young lady, at the imminent hazard of having her ear sliced off, had not been able to forbear looking round, some score of times, during the foregoing colloquy. Of her, however, Mr. Lillyvick took no notice: rather striving (so, at least, it seemed to Newman Noggs) to evade her observation, and to shrink into himself whenever he attracted her regards. Newman wondered very much what could have occasioned this altered behavior on the part of the collector; but, philosophically reflecting that he would most likely know, sooner or later, and that he could perfectly afford to wait, he was very little disturbed by the singularity of the old gentleman's deportment.

The cutting and curling being at last concluded, the old gentleman, who had been some time waiting, rose to go, and, walking out with Newman and his charge, took Newman's arm, and proceeded for some time without making any observation. Newman, who in power of taciturnity was excelled by few people, made no attempt to break silence; and so they went on, until they had

very nearly reached Miss Morleena's home, when Mr. Lillyvick said,—

"Were the Kenwigses very much overpowered, Mr. Noggs, by that news?"

"What news?" returned Newman.

"That about — my — being"

"Married?" suggested Newman.

"Ah!" replied Mr. Lillyvick, with another groan — this time not even disguised by a wheeze.

"It made ma cry when she knew it," interposed Miss Morleena, "but we kept it from her for a long time; and pa was very low in his spirits, but he is better now; and I was very ill, but I am better too."

"Would you give your great-uncle Lillyvick a kiss if he was to ask you, Morleena?" said the collector, with some hesitation.

"Yes, — uncle Lillyvick, I would," returned Miss Morleena, with the energy of both her parents combined; "but not aunt Lillyvick. She's not an aunt of mine, and I'll never call her one."

Immediately upon the utterance of these words, Mr. Lillyvick caught Miss Morleena up in his arms, and kissed her; and, being by this time at the door of the house where Mr. Kenwigs lodged (which, as has been before-mentioned, usually stood wide open), he walked straight up into Mr. Kenwigs's sitting-room, and put Miss Morleena down in the midst. Mr. and Mrs. Kenwigs were at supper. At sight of their perjured relative, Mrs. Kenwigs turned faint and pale, and Mr. Kenwigs rose majestically.

"Kenwigs," said the collector, "shake hands."

"Sir," said Mr. Kenwigs, "the time has been, when I was proud to shake hands with such a man as that

man as now surweys me. The time has been, sir," said Mr. Kenwigs, "when a wisit from that man has excited in me and my family's boozums sensations both nateral and awakening. But, now, I look upon that man with emotions totally surpassing everythink, and I ask myself where is his *h*onor, where is his straight-for'ardness, and where is his human natur'."

"Susan Kenwigs," said Mr. Lillyvick, turning humbly to his niece, "don't you say anything to me?"

"She is not equal to it, sir," said Mr. Kenwigs, striking the table emphatically. "What with the nursing of a healthy babby, and the reflections upon your cruel conduct, four pints of malt liquor a day is hardly able to sustain her."

"I am glad," said the poor collector meekly, "that the baby is a healthy one. I am very glad of that."

This was touching the Kenwigses on their tenderest point. Mrs. Kenwigs instantly burst into tears, and Mr. Kenwigs evinced great emotion.

"My pleasantest feeling, all the time that child was expected," said Mr. Kenwigs, mournfully, "was a-thinking, 'if it's a boy, as I hope it may be; for I have heard its uncle Lillyvick say again and again he would prefer our having a boy next — if it's a boy, what will his uncle Lillyvick say — what will he like him to be called — will he be Peter, or Alexander, or Pompey, or Diorgeenes, or what will he be?' and now when I look at him — a precious, unconscious, helpless infant, with no use in his little arms but to tear his little cap, and no use in his little legs but to kick his little self — when I see him a-lying on his mother's lap, cooing and cooing, and, in his innocent state, almost a-choking hisself with his little fist — when I see him such a

infant as he is, and think that that uncle Lillyvick, as was once a-going to be so fond of him, has withdrawed himself away, such a feeling of wengeance comes over me as no language can depicter, and I feel as if even that holy babe was a-telling me to hate him."

This affecting picture moved Mrs. Kenwigs deeply. After several imperfect words, which vainly attempted to struggle to the surface, but were drowned and washed away by the strong tide of her tears, she spake.

"Uncle," said Mrs. Kenwigs, "to think that you should have turned your back upon me and my dear children, and upon Kenwigs which is the author of their being — you who was once so kind and affectionate, and who, if anybody had told us such a thing of, we should have withered with scorn like lightning — you that little Lillyvick, our first and earliest boy, was named after at the very altar — oh gracious!"

"Was it money that we cared for?" said Mr. Kenwigs. "Was it property that we ever thought of?"

"No," cried Mrs. Kenwigs, "I scorn it."

"So do I," said Mr. Kenwigs, "and always did."

"My feelings have been lancerated," said Mrs. Kenwigs, "my heart has been torn asunder with anguish, I have been thrown back in my confinement, my unoffending infant has been rendered uncomfortable and fractious, Morleena has pined herself away to nothing; all this I forget and forgive, and with you, uncle, I never can quarrel. But never ask me to receive *her* — never do it, uncle. For I will not, I will not, I won't, I won't, I won't!"

"Susan, my dear," said Mr. Kenwigs, "consider your child."

"Yes," shrieked Mrs. Kenwigs, "I will consider my

child! I will consider my child! my own child, that no uncles can deprive me of; my own hated, despised, deserted, cut-off little child." And, here, the emotions of Mrs. Kenwigs became so violent, that Mr. Kenwigs was fain to administer hartshorn internally, and vinegar externally, and to destroy a staylace, four petticoat-strings, and several small buttons.

Newman had been a silent spectator of this scene; for Mr. Lillyvick had signed to him not to withdraw, and Mr. Kenwigs had further solicited his presence by a nod of invitation. When Mrs. Kenwigs had been, in some degree, restored, and Newman, as a person possessed of some influence with her, had remonstrated and begged her to compose herself, Mr. Lillyvick said in a faltering voice:

"I never shall ask anybody here to receive my — I needn't mention the word; you know what I mean. Kenwigs and Susan, yesterday was a week she eloped with a half-pay captain!"

Mr. and Mrs. Kenwigs started together.

"Eloped with a half-pay captain," repeated Mr. Lillyvick, "basely and falsely eloped with a half-pay captain — with a bottle-nosed captain that any man might have considered himself safe from. It was in this room," said Mr. Lillyvick, looking sternly round, "that I first see Henrietta Petowker. It is in this room that I turn her off, forever."

This declaration completely changed the whole posture of affairs. Mrs. Kenwigs threw herself upon the old gentleman's neck, bitterly reproaching herself for her late harshness, and exclaiming if she had suffered, what must his sufferings have been! Mr. Kenwigs grasped his hand, and vowed eternal friendship and

remorse. Mrs. Kenwigs was horror-stricken to think that she should ever have nourished in her bosom such a snake, adder, viper, serpent, and base crocodile, as Henrietta Petowker. Mr. Kenwigs argued that she must have been bad indeed not to have improved by so long a contemplation of Mrs. Kenwigs's virtue. Mrs. Kenwigs remembered that Mr. Kenwigs had often said that he was not quite satisfied of the propriety of Miss Petowker's conduct, and wondered how it was that she could have been blinded by such a wretch. Mr. Kenwigs remembered that he had had his suspicions, but did not wonder why Mrs. Kenwigs had not had hers, as she was all chastity, purity, and truth, and Henrietta all baseness, falsehood, and deceit. And Mr. and Mrs. Kenwigs both said, with strong feelings and tears of sympathy, that everything happened for the best; and conjured the good collector not to give way to unavailing grief, but to seek consolation in the society of those affectionate relations whose arms and hearts were ever open to him.

"Out of affection and regard for you, Susan and Kenwigs," said Mr. Lillyvick, "and not out of revenge and spite against her, for she is below it, I shall, to-morrow morning, settle upon your children, and make payable to the survivors of them when they come of age or marry, that money that I once meant to leave 'em in my will. The deed shall be executed to-morrow, and Mr. Noggs shall be one of the witnesses. He hears me promise this, and he shall see it done."

Overpowered by this noble and generous offer, Mr. Kenwigs, Mrs. Kenwigs, and Miss Morleena Kenwigs, all began to sob together; and the noise of their sobbing, communicating itself to the next room, where the

children lay abed, and causing them to cry too, Mr. Kenwigs rushed wildly in, and bringing them out in his arms, by two and two, tumbled them down in their nightcaps and gowns at the feet of Mr. Lillyvick, and called upon them to thank and bless him.

"And now," said Mr. Lillyvick, when a heart-rending scene had ensued and the children were cleared away again, "give me some supper. This took place twenty mile from town. I came up this morning, and have been lingering about, all day, without being able to make up my mind to come and see you. I humored her in everything, she had her own way, she did just as she pleased, and now she has done this. There was twelve teaspoons and twenty-four pound in sovereigns — I missed them first — it's a trial — I feel I shall never be able to knock a double knock again, when I go my rounds — don't say anything more about it, please — the spoons were worth — never mind — never mind!"

With such muttered outpourings as these, the old gentleman shed a few tears; but, they got him into the elbow-chair, and prevailed upon him, without much pressing, to make a hearty supper, and by the time he had finished his first pipe and disposed of half a dozen glasses out of a crown bowl of punch, ordered by Mr. Kenwigs, in celebration of his return to the bosom of his family, he seemed, though still very humble, quite resigned to his fate, and rather relieved than otherwise by the flight of his wife.

"When I see that man," said Mr. Kenwigs, with one hand round Mrs. Kenwigs's waist: his other hand supporting his pipe (which made him wink and cough very much, for he was no smoker): and his eyes on Morleena,

who sat upon her uncle's knee, " when I see that man as mingling, once again, in the spear which he adorns, and see his affections deweloping themselves in legitimate sitiwations, I feel that his nature is as elewated and expanded, as his standing afore society as a public character is unimpeached, and the woices of my infant children purvided for in life, seem to whisper to me softly, 'This is an ewent at which Evins itself looks down!'"

CHAPTER LIII.

CONTAINING THE FURTHER PROGRESS OF THE PLOT CONTRIVED BY MR. RALPH NICKLEBY AND MR. ARTHUR GRIDE.

With that settled resolution, and steadiness of purpose to which extreme circumstances so often give birth, acting upon far less excitable and more sluggish temperaments than that which was the lot of Madeline Bray's admirer, Nicholas started, at dawn of day, from the restless couch which no sleep had visited on the previous night, and prepared to make that last appeal, by whose slight and fragile thread her only remaining hope of escape depended.

Although to restless and ardent minds, morning may be the fitting season for exertion and activity, it is not always at that time that hope is strongest or the spirit most sanguine and buoyant. In trying and doubtful positions, youth, custom, a steady contemplation of the difficulties which surround us, and a familiarity with them, imperceptibly diminish our apprehensions and beget comparative indifference, if not a vague and reckless confidence in some relief, the means or nature of which we care not to foresee. But when we come, fresh, upon such things in the morning, with that dark and silent gap between us and yesterday; with every

link in the brittle chain of hope, to rivet afresh; our hot enthusiasm subdued, and cool calm reason substituted in its stead; doubt and misgiving revive. As the traveller sees farthest, by day, and becomes aware of rugged mountains and trackless plains which the friendly darkness had shrouded from his sight and mind together, so, the wayfarer in the toilsome path of human life, sees, with each returning sun, some new obstacle to surmount, some new height to be attained. Distances stretch out before him which, last night, were scarcely taken into account, and the light which gilds all nature with its cheerful beams, seems but to shine upon the weary obstacles that yet lie strewn between him and the grave.

So thought Nicholas, when, with the impatience natural to a situation like his, he softly left the house, and, feeling as though to remain in bed were to lose most precious time, and to be up and stirring were in some way to promote the end he had in view, wandered into London; perfectly well knowing that for hours to come he could not obtain speech with Madeline, and could do nothing but wish the intervening time away.

And, even now, as he paced the streets, and listlessly looked round on the gradually increasing bustle and preparation for the day, everything appeared to yield him some new occasion for despondency. Last night, the sacrifice of a young, affectionate, and beautiful creature, to such a wretch, and in such a cause, had seemed a thing too monstrous to succeed; and the warmer he grew, the more confident he felt that some interposition must save her from his clutches. But now, when he thought how regularly things went on, from day to day, in the same unvarying round — how youth and beauty

died, and ugly griping age lived tottering on — how crafty avarice grew rich, and manly honest hearts were poor and sad — how few they were who tenanted the stately houses, and how many those who lay in noisome pens, or rose each day and laid them down each night, and lived and died, father and son, mother and child, race upon race, and generation upon generation, without a home to shelter them or the energies of one single man directed to their aid — how, in seeking, not a luxurious and splendid life, but the bare means of a most wretched and inadequate subsistence, there were women and children in that one town, divided into classes, numbered and estimated as regularly as the noble families and folks of great degree, and reared from infancy to drive most criminal and dreadful trades — how ignorance was punished and never taught — how jail-doors gaped and gallows loomed, for thousands urged towards them by circumstances darkly curtaining their very cradles' heads, and but for which they might have earned their honest bread and lived in peace — how many died in soul, and had no chance of life — how many who could scarcely go astray, be they vicious as they would, turned haughtily from the crushed and stricken wretch who could scarce do otherwise, and who would have been a greater wonder had he or she done well, than even they had they done ill — how much injustice, misery, and wrong, there was, and yet how the world rolled on, from year to year, alike careless and indifferent, and no man seeking to remedy or redress it — when he thought of all this, and selected from the mass the one slight case on which his thoughts were bent, he felt, indeed, that there was little ground for hope, and little reason why it should not form an atom in the huge aggregate of distress and sorrow,

and add one small and unimportant unit to swell the great amount.

But, youth is not prone to contemplate the darkest side of a picture it can shift at will. By dint of reflecting on what he had to do, and reviving the train of thought which night had interrupted, Nicholas gradually summoned up his utmost energy, and when the morning was sufficiently advanced for his purpose, had no thought but that of using it to the best advantage. A hasty breakfast taken, and such affairs of business as required prompt attention, disposed of, he directed his steps to the residence of Madeline Bray: whither he lost no time in arriving.

It had occurred to him that, very possibly, the young lady might be denied, although to him she never had been; and he was still pondering upon the surest method of obtaining access to her in that case, when, coming to the door of the house, he found it had been left ajar — probably by the last person who had gone out. The occasion was not one upon which to observe the nicest ceremony; therefore, availing himself of this advantage, Nicholas walked gently up-stairs and knocked at the door of the room into which he had been accustomed to be shown. Receiving permission to enter, from some person on the other side, he opened the door and walked in.

Bray and his daughter were sitting there alone. It was nearly three weeks since he had seen her last, but there was a change in the lovely girl before him which told Nicholas, in startling terms, how much mental suffering had been compressed into that short time. There are no words which can express, nothing with which can be compared, the perfect pallor, the clear transparent

whiteness, of the beautiful face which turned towards him when he entered. Her hair was a rich deep brown, but shading that face, and straying upon a neck that rivalled it in whiteness, it seemed by the strong contrast raven black. Something of wildness and restlessness there was in the dark eye, but there was the same patient look, the same expression of gentle mournfulness which he well remembered, and no trace of a single tear. Most beautiful, — more beautiful, perhaps, than ever — there was something in her face which quite unmanned him, and appeared far more touching than the wildest agony of grief. It was not merely calm and composed, but fixed and rigid, as though the violent effort which had summoned that composure beneath her father's eye, while it mastered all other thoughts, had prevented even the momentary expression they had communicated to the features from subsiding, and had fastened it there, as an evidence of its triumph.

The father sat opposite to her — not looking directly in her face, but glancing at her, as he talked with a gay air which ill disguised the anxiety of his thoughts. The drawing materials were not on their accustomed table, nor were any of the other tokens of her usual occupations to be seen. The little vases which Nicholas had always seen filled with fresh flowers, were empty, or supplied only with a few withered stalks and leaves. The bird was silent. The cloth that covered his cage at night, was not removed. His mistress had forgotten him.

There are times when, the mind being painfully alive to receive impressions, a great deal may be noted at a glance. This was one, for Nicholas had but glanced round him when he was recognized by Mr. Bray, who said impatiently, —

"Now, sir, what do you want? Name your errand here, quickly, if you please, for my daughter and I are busily engaged with other and more important matters than those you come about. Come, sir, address yourself to your business at once."

Nicholas could very well discern that the irritability and impatience of this speech were assumed, and that Bray, in his heart, was rejoiced at any interruption which promised to engage the attention of his daughter. He bent his eyes involuntarily upon the father as he spoke, and marked his uneasiness; for he colored and turned his head away.

The device, however, so far as it was a device for causing Madeline to interfere, was successful. She rose, and advancing towards Nicholas paused half-way, and stretched out her hand as expecting a letter.

"Madeline," said her father impatiently, "my love, what are you doing?"

"Miss Bray expects an enclosure perhaps," said Nicholas, speaking very distinctly, and with an emphasis she could scarcely misunderstand. "My employer is absent from England, or I should have brought a letter with me. I hope she will give me time — a little time — I ask a very little time."

"If that is all you come about, sir," said Mr. Bray, "you may make yourself easy on that head. Madeline, my dear, I didn't know this person was in your debt?"

"A — a trifle I believe," returned Madeline, faintly.

"I suppose you think now," said Bray, wheeling his chair round and confronting Nicholas, "that, but for such pitiful sums as you bring here, because my daughter has chosen to employ her time as she has, we should starve?"

"I have not thought about it," returned Nicholas.

"You have not thought about it!" sneered the invalid. "You know you *have* thought about it, and have thought that, and think so every time you come here. Do you suppose, young man, that I don't know what little purse-proud tradesmen are, when, through some fortunate circumstances, they get the upper-hand for a brief day — or think they get the upper-hand — of a gentleman?"

"My business," said Nicholas respectfully, "is with a lady."

"With a gentleman's daughter, sir," returned the sick man, "and the pettifogging spirit is the same. But perhaps you bring *orders*, eh? Have you any fresh *orders* for my daughter, sir?"

Nicholas understood the tone of triumph in which this interrogatory was put; but remembering the necessity of supporting his assumed character, produced a scrap of paper purporting to contain a list of some subjects for drawings which his employer desired to have executed; and with which he had prepared himself in case of any such contingency.

"Oh!" said Mr. Bray. "These are the orders, are they?"

"Since you insist upon the term, sir — yes," replied Nicholas.

"Then you may tell your master," said Bray, tossing the paper back again, with an exulting smile, "that my daughter — Miss Madeline Bray — condescends to employ herself no longer in such labors as these; that she is not at his beck and call, as he supposes her to be; that we don't live upon his money, as he flatters himself we do; that he may give whatever he owes us, to the first beggar that passes his shop, or add it to his own profits next time

he calculates them ; and that he may go to the devil, for me. That's my acknowledgment of his orders, sir ! "

" And this is the independence of a man who sells his daughter as he has sold that weeping girl ! " thought Nicholas.

The father was too much absorbed with his own exultation to mark the look of scorn which, for an instant, Nicholas could not have suppressed had he been upon the rack. " There," he continued, after a short silence, " you have your message and can retire — unless you have any further — ha ! — any further orders."

" I have none," said Nicholas ; " nor in consideration of the station you once held, have I used that or any other word which, however harmless in itself, could be supposed to imply authority on my part or dependence on yours. I have no orders, but I have fears — fears that I will express, chafe as you may — fears that you may be consigning that young lady to something worse than supporting you by the labor of her hands, had she worked herself dead. These are my fears, and these fears I found upon your own demeanor. Your conscience will tell you, sir, whether I construe it well or not."

" For Heaven's sake ! " cried Madeline, interposing in alarm between them. " Remember, sir, he is ill."

" Ill ! " cried the invalid, gasping and catching for breath. " Ill ! Ill ! I am bearded and bullied by a shopboy, and she beseeches him to pity me and remember I am ill ! "

He fell into a paroxysm of his disorder, so violent that for a few moments Nicholas was alarmed for his life ; but finding that he began to recover, he withdrew, after signifying by a gesture to the young lady that he had some-

thing important to communicate, and would wait for her outside the room. He could hear that the sick man came, gradually, but slowly to himself, and that, without any reference to what had just occurred, as though he had no distinct recollection of it, as yet, he requested to be left alone.

"Oh!" thought Nicholas, "that this slender chance might not be lost, and that I might prevail, if it were but for one week's time and reconsideration!"

"You are charged with some commission to me, sir," said Madeline, presenting herself in great agitation. "Do not press it now, I beg and pray you. The day after to-morrow — come here then."

"It will be too late — too late for what I have to say," rejoined Nicholas, "and you will not be here. Oh, madam, if you have but one thought of him who sent me here, but one last lingering care for your own peace of mind and heart, I do for God's sake urge you to give me a hearing."

She attempted to pass him, but Nicholas gently detained her.

"A hearing," said Nicholas. "I ask you but to hear me — not me alone, but him for whom I speak, who is far away and does not know your danger. In the name of Heaven hear me!"

The poor attendant, with her eyes swollen and red with weeping, stood by; and to her, Nicholas appealed in such passionate terms that she opened a side-door, and, supporting her mistress into an adjoining room, beckoned Nicholas to follow them.

"Leave me, sir, pray," said the young lady.

"I cannot, will not leave you thus," returned Nicholas. "I have a duty to discharge; and, either here, or in the

room from which we have just now come, at whatever risk or hazard to Mr. Bray, I must beseech you to contemplate again the fearful course to which you have been impelled."

"What course is this you speak of, and impelled by whom, sir?" demanded the young lady, with an effort to speak proudly.

"I speak of this marriage," returned Nicholas, "of this marriage, fixed for to-morrow, by one who never faltered in a bad purpose, or lent his aid to any good design; of this marriage, the history of which is known to me, better, far better, than it is to you. I know what web is wound about you. I know what men they are from whom these schemes have come. You are betrayed, and sold for money — for gold, whose every coin is rusted with tears, if not red with the blood of ruined men, who have fallen desperately by their own mad hands."

"You say you have a duty to discharge," said Madeline, "and so have I. And with the help of Heaven I will perform it."

"Say rather with the help of devils," replied Nicholas, "with the help of men, one of them your destined husband, who are" ——

"I must not hear this," cried the young lady, striving to repress a shudder, occasioned, as it seemed, even by this slight allusion to Arthur Gride. "This evil, if evil it be, has been of my own seeking. I am impelled to this course by no one, but follow it of my own free-will. You see I am not constrained or forced. Report this," said Madeline, "to my dear friend and benefactor, and, taking with you my prayers and thanks for him and for yourself, leave me forever!"

"Not until I have besought you, with all the earnest-

ness and fervor by which I am animated," cried Nicholas, "to postpone this marriage for one short week. Not until I have besought you to think, more deeply than you can have done, influenced as you are, upon the step you are about to take. Although you cannot be fully conscious of the villany of this man to whom you are about to give your hand, some of his deeds you know. You have heard him speak, and have looked upon his face. Reflect, reflect, before it is too late, on the mockery of plighting to him at the altar, faith in which your heart can have no share — of uttering solemn words, against which nature and reason must rebel — of the degradation of yourself in your own esteem, which must ensue, and must be aggravated every day, as his detested character opens upon you more and more. Shrink from the loathsome companionship of this wretch as you would from corruption and disease. Suffer toil and labor if you will, but shun him, shun him, and be happy. For, believe me, I speak the truth; — the most abject poverty, the most wretched condition of human life, with a pure and upright mind, would be happiness to that which you must undergo as the wife of such a man as this!"

Long before Nicholas ceased to speak, the young lady buried her face in her hands, and gave her tears free way. In a voice at first inarticulate with emotion, but gradually recovering strength as she proceeded, she answered him, —

"I will not disguise from you, sir — though perhaps I ought — that I have undergone great pain of mind, and have been nearly broken-hearted since I saw you last. I do *not* love this gentleman. The difference between our ages, tastes, and habits, forbids it. This he knows, and knowing, still offers me his hand. By accepting it,

and by that step alone, I can release my father who is dying in this place; prolong his life, perhaps, for many years; restore him to comfort — I may almost call it affluence — and relieve a generous man from the burden of assisting one, by whom, I grieve to say, his noble heart is little understood. Do not think so poorly of me as to believe that I feign a love I do not feel. Do not report so ill of me, for *that* I could not bear. If I cannot, in reason or in nature, love the man who pays this price for my poor hand, I can discharge the duties of a wife: I can be all he seeks in me, and will. He is content to take me as I am. I have passed my word, and should rejoice, not weep, that it is so — I do. The interest you take in one so friendless and forlorn as I, the delicacy with which you have discharged your trust, the faith you have kept with me, have my warmest thanks: and, while I make this last feeble acknowledgment, move me to tears, as you see. But I do not repent, nor am I unhappy. I am happy in the prospect of all I can achieve so easily. I shall be more so when I look back upon it, and all is done, I know."

"Your tears fall faster as you talk of happiness," said Nicholas, "and you shun the contemplation of that dark future which must be laden with so much misery to you. Defer this marriage for a week — for but one week!"

"He was talking, when you came upon us just now, with such smiles as I remember to have seen of old, and have not seen for many and many a day, of the freedom that was to come to-morrow," said Madeline, with momentary firmness, "of the welcome change, the fresh air: all the new scenes and objects that would bring fresh life to his exhausted frame. His eye grew bright, and his face lightened at the thought. I will not defer it for an hour."

"These are but tricks and wiles to urge you on," cried Nicholas.

"I'll hear no more," said Madeline, hurriedly, "I have heard too much — more than I should — already. What I have said to you, sir, I have said as to that dear friend to whom I trust in you honorably to repeat it. Some time hence, when I am more composed and reconciled to my new mode of life, if I should live so long, I will write to him. Meantime, all holy angels shower blessings on his head, and prosper and preserve him."

She was hurrying past Nicholas, when he threw himself before her, and implored her to think, but once again, upon the fate to which she was precipitately hastening.

"There is no retreat," said Nicholas, in an agony of supplication; "no withdrawing! All regret will be unavailing, and deep and bitter it must be. What can I say, that will induce you to pause at this last moment! What can I do, to save you!"

"Nothing," she incoherently replied. "This is the hardest trial I have had. Have mercy on me, sir, I beseech, and do not pierce my heart with such appeals as these. I — I hear him calling. I — I — must not, will not, remain here for another instant."

"If this were a plot," said Nicholas, with the same violent rapidity with which she spoke, "a plot, not yet laid bare by me, but which, with time, I might unravel; if you were (not knowing it) entitled to fortune of your own, which, being recovered, would do all that this marriage can accomplish, would you not retract?"

"No, no, no! — it is impossible; it is a child's tale, time would bring his death. He is calling again!"

"It may be the last time we shall ever meet on earth,"

said Nicholas, "it may be better for me that we should never meet more."

"For both — for both," replied Madeline, not heeding what she said. "The time will come when to recall the memory of this one interview might drive me mad. Be sure to tell them, that you left me calm and happy. And God be with you, sir, and my grateful heart and blessing!"

She was gone. Nicholas, staggering from the house, thought of the hurried scene which had just closed upon him, as if it were the phantom of some wild, unquiet dream. The day wore on; at night, having been enabled in some measure to collect his thoughts, he issued forth again.

That night, being the last of Arthur Gride's bachelorship, found him in tip-top spirits and great glee. The bottle-green suit had been brushed, ready for the morrow. Peg Sliderskew had rendered the accounts of her past house-keeping; the eighteenpence had been rigidly accounted for (she was never trusted with a larger sum at once, and the accounts were not usually balanced more than twice a day); every preparation had been made for the coming festival; and Arthur might have sat down and contemplated his approaching happiness, but that he preferred sitting down and contemplating the entries in a dirty old vellum-book with rusty clasps.

"Well-a-day!" he chuckled, as sinking on his knees before a strong chest screwed down to the floor, he thrust in his arm nearly up to the shoulder, and slowly drew forth this greasy volume, "Well-a-day now, this is all my library, but it's one of the most entertaining books that were ever written! It's a delightful book, and all true and real — that's the best of it — true as the Bank of

England, and real as its gold and silver. Written by Arthur Gride — he, he, he! None of your story-book writers will ever make as good a book as this, I warrant me. It's composed for private circulation — for my own particular reading, and nobody else's. He, he, he!"

Muttering this soliloquy, Arthur carried his precious volume to the table, and, adjusting it upon a dusty desk, put on his spectacles, and began to pore among the leaves.

"It's a large sum to Mr. Nickleby," he said, in a dolorous voice. "Debt to be paid in full, nine hundred and seventy-five, four, three. Additional sum as per bond, five hundred pound. One thousand, four hundred and seventy-five pounds, four shillings, and threepence, tomorrow at twelve o'clock. On the other side though, there's the *per contra*, by means of this pretty chick. But, again, there's the question whether I mightn't have brought all this about, myself. 'Faint heart never won fair lady.' Why was my heart so faint? Why didn't I boldly open it to Bray, myself, and save one thousand four hundred and seventy-five, four, three!"

These reflections depressed the old usurer so much, as to wring a feeble groan or two from his breast, and cause him to declare, with uplifted hands, that he would die in a workhouse. Remembering on further cogitation, however, that under any circumstances he must have paid, or handsomely compounded for, Ralph's debt, and being by no means confident that he would have succeeded had he undertaken his enterprise alone, he regained his equanimity, and chattered and mowed over more satisfactory items, until the entrance of Peg Sliderskew interrupted him.

"Aha, Peg!" said Arthur, "what is it? What is it now, Peg?"

"It's the fowl," replied Peg, holding up a plate containing a little — a very little one — quite a phenomenon of a fowl — so very small and skinny.

"A beautiful bird!" said Arthur, after inquiring the price, and finding it proportionate to the size. "With a rasher of ham, and an egg made into sauce, and potatoes, and greens, and an apple-pudding, Peg, and a little bit of cheese, we shall have a dinner for an emperor. There'll only be she and me — and you, Peg, when we've done."

"Don't you complain of the expense afterwards," said Mrs. Sliderskew, sulkily.

"I'm afraid we must live expensively for the first week," returned Arthur, with a groan, "and then we must make up for it. I won't eat more than I can help, and I know you love your old master too much to eat more than *you* can help, don't you, Peg?"

"Don't I what?" said Peg.

"Love your old master too much" —

"No, not a bit too much," said Peg.

"Oh dear, I wish the devil had this woman!" cried Arthur — "love him too much to eat more than you can help at his expense."

"At his what?" said Peg.

"Oh dear! she can never hear the most important word, and hears all the others!" whined Gride. "At his expense — you catamaran!"

The last-mentioned tribute to the charms of Mrs. Sliderskew, being uttered in a whisper, that lady assented to the general proposition by a harsh growl, which was accompanied by a ring at the street-door.

"There's the bell," said Arthur.

"Aye, aye; I know that," rejoined Peg.

"Then why don't you go?" bawled Arthur.

"Go where?" retorted Peg. "I a'n't doing any harm here, am I?"

Arthur Gride in reply repeated the word "bell" as loud as he could roar; and, his meaning being rendered further intelligible to Mrs. Sliderskew's dull sense of hearing by pantomime expressive of ringing at a street-door, Peg hobbled out, after sharply demanding why he hadn't said there was a ring, before, instead of talking about all manner of things that had nothing to do with it, and keeping her half-pint of beer waiting on the steps.

"There's a change come over you, Mrs. Peg," said Arthur, following her out with his eyes. "What it means I don't quite know; but, if it lasts, we shan't agree together long I see. You are turning crazy, I think. If you are, you must take yourself off, Mrs. Peg — or be taken off. All's one to me." Turning over the leaves of his book as he muttered this, he soon lighted upon something which attracted his attention, and forgot Peg Sliderskew and everything else in the engrossing interest of its pages.

The room had no other light than that which it derived from a dim and dirt-clogged lamp, whose lazy wick, being still further obscured by a dark shade, cast its feeble rays over a very little space, and left all beyond in heavy shadow. This lamp, the money-lender had drawn so close to him, that there was only room between it and himself for the book over which he bent; and as he sat, with his elbows on the desk, and his sharp cheek-bones resting on his hands, it only served to bring out his ugly features in strong relief, together with the little table at which he sat, and to

shroud all the rest of the chamber in a deep sullen gloom. Raising his eyes, and looking vacantly into this gloom as he made some mental calculation, Arthur Gride suddenly met the fixed gaze of a man.

"Thieves! thieves!" shrieked the usurer, starting up and folding his book to his breast, "robbers! murder!"

"What is the matter?" said the form, advancing.

"Keep off!" cried the trembling wretch. "Is it a man or a — a" —

"For what do you take me, if not for a man?" was the inquiry.

"Yes, yes," cried Arthur Gride, shading his eyes with his hand, "it is a man, and not a spirit. It is a man. Robbers! robbers!"

"For what are these cries raised — unless indeed you know me, and have some purpose in your brain?" said the stranger, coming close up to him. "I am no thief."

"What then, and how come you here?" cried Gride, somewhat reassured, but still retreating from his visitor, "what is your name, and what do you want?"

"My name you need not know," was the reply. "I came here, because I was shown the way by your servant. I have addressed you twice or thrice, but you were too profoundly engaged with your book to hear me, and I have been silently waiting until you should be less abstracted. What I want, I will tell you, when you can summon up courage enough to hear and understand me."

Arthur Gride venturing to regard his visitor more attentively, and perceiving that he was a young man of good mien and bearing, returned to his seat, and muttering that there were bad characters about, and that this, with former attempts upon his house, had made him ner-

vous, requested his visitor to sit down. This however he declined.

"Good God! I don't stand up to have you at an advantage," said Nicholas (for Nicholas it was), as he observed a gesture of alarm on the part of Gride. "Listen to me. You are to be married to-morrow morning."

"N — n — no," rejoined Gride. "Who said I was? How do you know that?"

"No matter how," replied Nicholas, "I know it. The young lady who is to give you her hand, hates and despises you. Her blood runs cold at the mention of your name — the vulture and the lamb, the rat and the dove, could not be worse matched than you and she. You see I know her."

Gride looked at him as if he were petrified with astonishment, but did not speak: perhaps lacking the power.

"You and another man, Ralph Nickleby by name, have hatched this plot between you," pursued Nicholas. "You pay him for his share in bringing about this sale of Madeline Bray. You do. A lie is trembling on your lips, I see."

He paused; but, Arthur making no reply, resumed again.

"You pay yourself by defrauding her. How or by what means — for I scorn to sully her cause by falsehood or deceit — I do not know; at present I do not know, but I am not alone or single-handed in this business. If the energy of man can compass the discovery of your fraud and treachery before your death — if wealth, revenge, and just hatred, can hunt and track you through your windings — you will yet be called to a dear account for this. We are on the scent already —

judge you, who know what we do not, when we shall have you down!"

He paused again, and still Arthur Gride glared upon him in silence.

"If you were a man to whom I could appeal with any hope of touching his compassion or humanity," said Nicholas, "I would urge upon you to remember the helplessness, the innocence, the youth, of this lady; her worth and beauty, her filial excellence, and last, and more than all as concerning you more nearly, the appeal she has made to your mercy and your manly feeling. But, I take the only ground that can be taken with men like you, and ask what money will buy you off. Remember the danger to which you are exposed. You see I know enough, to know much more with very little help. Bate some expected gain, for the risk you save, and say what is your price."

Old Arthur Gride moved his lips, but they only formed an ugly smile and were motionless again.

"You think," said Nicholas, "that the price would not be paid. Miss Bray has wealthy friends who would coin their very hearts to save her in such a strait as this. Name your price, defer these nuptials for but a few days, and see whether those I speak of, shrink from the payment. Do you hear me?"

When Nicholas began, Arthur Gride's impression was, that Ralph Nickleby had betrayed him; but, as he proceeded, he felt convinced that however he had come by the knowledge he possessed, the part he acted was a genuine one, and that with Ralph he had no concern. All he seemed to know, for certain, was, that he, Gride, paid Ralph's debt; but that, to anybody who knew the circumstances of Bray's detention — even to Bray himself

on Ralph's own statement — must be perfectly notorious. As to the fraud on Madeline herself, his visitor knew so little about its nature or extent, that it might be a lucky guess, or a hap-hazard accusation. Whether or no, he had clearly no key to the mystery, and could not hurt him who kept it close within his own breast. The allusion to friends, and the offer of money, Gride held to be mere empty vaporing, for purposes of delay. "And even if money were to be had," thought Arthur Gride, as he glanced at Nicholas, and trembled with passion at his boldness and audacity, "I'd have that dainty chick for my wife, and cheat *you* of her, young smooth-face!"

Long habit of weighing and noting well what clients said, and nicely balancing chances in his mind and calculating odds to their faces, without the least appearance of being so engaged, had rendered Gride quick in forming conclusions, and arriving, from puzzling, intricate, and often contradictory premises, at very cunning deductions. Hence it was, that, as Nicholas went on, he followed him, closely with his own constructions, and, when he ceased to speak, was as well prepared as if he had deliberated for a fortnight.

"I hear you," he cried, starting from his seat, casting back the fastenings of the window-shutters, and throwing up the sash. "Help here! Help! Help!"

"What are you doing!" said Nicholas, seizing him by the arm.

"I'll cry robbers, thieves, murder, alarm the neighborhood, struggle with you, let loose some blood, and swear you came to rob me, if you don't quit my house," replied Gride, drawing in his head with a frightful grin, "I will!"

"Wretch!" cried Nicholas.

"*You'll* bring your threats here, will you?" said Gride, whom jealousy of Nicholas and a sense of his own triumph had converted into a perfect fiend. "You, the disappointed lover — oh dear! He! he! he! — but you shan't have her, nor she you. She's my wife, my doting little wife. Do you think she'll miss you? Do you think she'll weep? I shall like to see her weep — I shan't mind it. She looks prettier in tears."

"Villain!" said Nicholas, choking with his rage.

"One minute more," cried Arthur Gride, "and I'll rouse the street with such screams, as, if they were raised by anybody else, should wake me even in the arms of pretty Madeline."

"You hound!" said Nicholas, "If you were but a younger man" ——

"Oh yes!" sneered Arthur Gride, "if I was but a younger man it wouldn't be so bad; but for me, so old and ugly — to be jilted by little Madeline for me!"

"Hear me," said Nicholas, "and be thankful I have enough command over myself not to fling you into the street, which no aid could prevent my doing if I once grappled with you. I have been no lover of this lady's. No contract or engagement, no word of love, has ever passed between us. She does not even know my name."

"I'll ask it for all that — I'll beg it of her with kisses," said Arthur Gride. "Yes, and she'll tell me, and pay them back, and we'll laugh together, and hug ourselves — and be very merry — when we think of the poor youth that wanted to have her, but couldn't because she was bespoke by me!"

This taunt brought such an expression into the face of Nicholas, that Arthur Gride plainly apprehended it to be the forerunner of his putting his threat of throwing

him into the street in immediate execution; for he thrust his head out of the window, and holding tight on with both hands, raised a pretty brisk alarm. Not thinking it necessary to abide the issue of the noise, Nicholas gave vent to an indignant defiance, and stalked from the room and from the house. Arthur Gride watched him across the street, and then, drawing in his head, fastened the window as before, and sat down to take breath.

"If she ever turns pettish or ill-humored, I'll taunt her with that spark," he said, when he had recovered. "She'll little think I know about him; and, if I manage it well, I can break her spirit by this means and have her under my thumb. I'm glad nobody came. I didn't call too loud. The audacity to enter my house, and open upon me! — But I shall have a very good triumph to-morrow, and he'll be gnawing his fingers off: perhaps drown himself, or cut his throat! I shouldn't wonder! That would make it quite complete, that would — quite."

When he had become restored to his usual condition by these and other comments on his approaching triumph, Arthur Gride put away his book, and, having locked the chest with great caution, descended into the kitchen to warn Peg Sliderskew to bed, and scold her for having afforded such ready admission to a stranger.

The unconscious Peg, however, not being able to comprehend the offence of which she had been guilty, he summoned her to hold the light, while he made a tour of the fastenings, and secured the street-door with his own hands.

"Top bolt," muttered Arthur, fastening as he spoke, "bottom bolt — chain — bar — double-lock — and key out to put under my pillow! So, if any more rejected admirers come, they may come through the key-hole.

And now I'll go to sleep till half-past five, when I must get up to be married, Peg!"

With that, he jocularly tapped Mrs. Sliderskew under the chin, and appeared, for the moment, inclined to celebrate the close of his bachelor days by imprinting a kiss on her shrivelled lips. Thinking better of it, however, he gave her chin another tap, in lieu of that warmer familiarity, and stole away to bed.

CHAPTER LIV.

THE CRISIS OF THE PROJECT AND ITS RESULT.

THERE are not many men who lie abed too late, or oversleep themselves, on their wedding-morning. A legend there is, of somebody remarkable for absence of mind, who opened his eyes upon the day which was to give him a young wife, and forgetting all about the matter, rated his servants for providing him with such fine clothes as had been prepared for the festival. There is also a legend of a young gentleman, who, not having before his eyes the fear of the canons of the church for such cases made and provided, conceived a passion for his grandmother. Both cases are of a singular and special kind, and it is very doubtful whether either can be considered as a precedent likely to be extensively followed by succeeding generations.

Arthur Gride had enrobed himself in his marriage garments of bottle-green, a full hour before Mrs. Sliderskew, shaking off her more heavy slumbers, knocked at his chamber-door; and he had hobbled down-stairs in full array and smacked his lips over a scanty taste of his favorite cordial, ere that delicate piece of antiquity enlightened the kitchen with her presence.

"Faugh!" said Peg, grubbing, in the discharge of her domestic functions, among a scanty heap of ashes in the rusty grate, "Wedding indeed! A precious wedding!

He wants somebody better than his old Peg to take care of him, does he? And what has he said to me, many and many a time, to keep me content with short food, small wages, and little fire? 'My will, Peg! my will!' says he, 'I'm a bachelor — no friends — no relations, Peg.' Lies! And now he's to bring home a new mistress, a baby-faced chit of a girl! If he wanted a wife, the fool, why couldn't he have one suitable to his age and that knew his ways? She won't come in *my* way, he says. No, that she won't, but you little think why, Arthur boy!"

While Mrs. Sliderskew, influenced possibly by some lingering feelings of disappointment and personal slight, occasioned by her old master's preference for another, was giving loose to these grumblings below-stairs, Arthur Gride was cogitating in the parlor upon what had taken place last night.

"I can't think how he can have picked up what he knows," said Arthur, "unless I have committed myself — let something drop at Bray's, for instance, which has been overheard. Perhaps I may. I shouldn't be surprised if that was it. Mr. Nickleby was often angry at my talking to him before we got outside the door. I mustn't tell him that part of the business, or he'll put me out of sorts, and make me nervous for the day."

Ralph was universally looked up to, and recognized among his fellows as a superior genius, but upon Arthur Gride his stern unyielding character and consummate art had made so deep an impression, that he was actually afraid of him. Cringing and cowardly to the core, by nature, Arthur Gride humbled himself in the dust before Ralph Nickleby, and, even when they had not this stake in common, would have licked his shoes and

crawled upon the ground before him rather than venture to return him word for word, or retort upon him in any other spirit than one of the most slavish and abject sycophancy.

To Ralph Nickleby's, Arthur Gride now betook himself according to appointment; and to Ralph Nickleby he related, how, last night, some young blustering blade, whom he had never seen, forced his way into his house, and tried to frighten him from the proposed nuptials: — told, in short, what Nicholas had said and done, with the slight reservation upon which he had determined.

"Well, and what then?" said Ralph.

"Oh! nothing more," rejoined Gride.

"He tried to frighten you," said Ralph, "and you *were* frightened I suppose; is that it?"

"I frightened him by crying thieves and murder," replied Gride. "Once I was in earnest, I tell you that, for I had more than half a mind to swear he uttered threats, and demanded my life or my money."

"Oho!" said Ralph, eying him askew. "Jealous too!"

"Dear now, see that!" cried Arthur, rubbing his hands and affecting to laugh.

"Why do you make those grimaces, man?" said Ralph; "you *are* jealous — and with good cause I think."

"No, no, no, — not with good cause, hey? You don't think with good cause, do you?" cried Arthur, faltering, "Do you though — hey?"

"Why, how stands the fact?" returned Ralph. "Here is an old man about to be forced in marriage upon a girl; and to this old man there comes a handsome young fellow — you said he was handsome, didn't you?"

"No!" snarled Arthur Gride.

"Oh!" rejoined Ralph, "I thought you did. Well! Handsome or not handsome, to this old man there comes a young fellow who casts all manner of fierce defiances in his teeth — gums I should rather say — and tells him in plain terms that his mistress hates him. What does he do that for? Philanthropy's sake?"

"Not for love of the lady," replied Gride, "for he said that no word of love — his very words — had ever passed between 'em."

"He said!" repeated Ralph, contemptuously. "But I like him for one thing, and that is, his giving you this fair warning to keep your — what is it? — Tit-tit or dainty chick — which? — under lock and key. Be careful, Gride, be careful. It's a triumph, too, to tear her away from a gallant young rival: a great triumph for an old man! It only remains to keep her safe when you have her — that's all."

"What a man it is!" cried Arthur Gride, affecting, in the extremity of his torture, to be highly amused. And then he added, anxiously, "Yes; to keep her safe, that's all. And that isn't much, is it?"

"Much!" said Ralph, with a sneer. "Why, everybody knows what easy things to understand and to control, women are. But come, it's very nearly time for you to be made happy. You'll pay the bond, now, I suppose, to save us trouble afterwards."

"Oh what a man you are!" croaked Arthur.

"Why not?" said Ralph. "Nobody will pay you interest for the money, I suppose, between this and twelve o'clock: will they?"

"But nobody would pay you interest for it either, you know," returned Arthur, leering at Ralph with

all the cunning and slyness he could throw into his face.

"Besides which," said Ralph, suffering his lip to curl into a smile, "you haven't the money about you, and you weren't prepared for this, or you'd have brought it with you; and there's nobody you'd so much like to accommodate as me. I see. We trust each other in about an equal degree. Are you ready?"

Gride, who had done nothing but grin, and nod, and chatter, during this last speech of Ralph's, answered in the affirmative; and, producing from his hat a couple of large white favors, pinned one on his breast, and with considerable difficulty induced his friend to do the like. Thus accoutred, they got into a hired coach which Ralph had in waiting, and drove to the residence of the fair and most wretched bride.

Gride, whose spirits and courage had gradually failed him more and more as they approached nearer and nearer to the house, was utterly dismayed and cowed by the mournful silence which pervaded it. The face of the poor servant-girl, the only person they saw, was disfigured with tears and want of sleep. There was nobody to receive or welcome them; and they stole up-stairs into the usual sitting-room, more like two burglars than the bridegroom and his friend.

"One would think," said Ralph, speaking, in spite of himself, in a low and subdued voice, "that there was a funeral going on here, and not a wedding."

"He, he!" tittered his friend, "you are so — so very funny!"

"I need be," remarked Ralph, dryly, "for this is rather dull and chilling. Look a little brisker, man, and not so hang-dog like!"

"Yes, yes, I will," said Gride. "But — but — you don't think she's coming just yet, do you?"

"Why, I suppose she'll not come till she is obliged," returned Ralph, looking at his watch, "and she has a good half-hour to spare yet. Curb your impatience."

"I — I — am not impatient," stammered Arthur. "I wouldn't be hard with her for the world. Oh dear, dear, not on any account. Let her take her time — her own time. Her time shall be ours by all means."

While Ralph bent upon his trembling friend a keen look, which showed that he perfectly understood the reason of this great consideration and regard, a footstep was heard upon the stairs, and Bray himself came into the room on tiptoe, and holding up his hand with a cautious gesture, as if there were some sick person near, who must not be disturbed.

"Hush!" he said, in a low voice. "She was very ill, last night. I thought she would have broken her heart. She is dressed, and crying bitterly in her own room; but she's better, and quite quiet — that's everything!"

"She is ready, is she?" said Ralph.

"Quite ready," returned the father.

"And not likely to delay us by any young-lady weaknesses — fainting, or so forth?" said Ralph.

"She may be safely trusted now," returned Bray. "I have been talking to her, this morning. Here — come a little this way."

He drew Ralph Nickleby to the farther end of the room, and pointed towards Gride, who sat huddled together in a corner, fumbling nervously with the buttons of his coat, and exhibiting a face, of which every skulking and base expression was sharpened and aggravated to the utmost by his anxiety and trepidation.

"Look at that man," whispered Bray, emphatically. "This seems a cruel thing, after all."

"What seems a cruel thing?" inquired Ralph, with as much stolidity of face, as if he really were in utter ignorance of the other's meaning.

"This marriage," answered Bray. "Don't ask me what. You know as well as I do."

Ralph shrugged his shoulders, in silent deprecation of Bray's impatience, and elevated his eyebrows, and pursed his lips, as men do when they are prepared with a sufficient answer to some remark, but wait for a more favorable opportunity of advancing it, or think it scarcely worth while to answer their adversary at all.

"Look at him. Does it not seem cruel?" said Bray.

"No!" replied Ralph boldly.

"I say it does," retorted Bray, with a show of much irritation. "It is a cruel thing, by all that's bad and treacherous!"

When men are about to commit, or to sanction the commission of some injustice, it is not uncommon for them to express pity for the object either of that or some parallel proceeding, and to feel themselves, at the time, quite virtuous and moral, and immensely superior to those who express no pity at all. This is a kind of upholding of faith above works, and is very comfortable. To do Ralph Nickleby justice, he seldom practised this sort of dissimulation; but he understood those who did, and therefore suffered Bray to say, again and again, with great vehemence, that they were jointly doing a very cruel thing, before he again offered to interpose a word.

"You see what a dry, shrivelled, withered old chip it is," returned Ralph, when the other was at length silent. "If he were younger, it might be cruel, but as it is —

hark 'ee, Mr. Bray, he'll die soon, and leave her a rich young widow! Miss Madeline consults your taste this time; let her consult her own next."

"True, true," said Bray, biting his nails, and plainly very ill at ease. "I couldn't do anything better for her than advise her to accept these proposals, could I? Now, I ask you, Nickleby, as a man of the world — could I?"

"Surely not," answered Ralph. "I tell you what, sir; — there are a hundred fathers, within a circuit of five miles from this place; well off; good, rich, substantial men; who would gladly give their daughters, and their own ears with them, to that very man yonder, ape and mummy as he looks."

"So there are!" exclaimed Bray, eagerly catching at anything which seemed a justification of himself. "And so I told her, both last night and to-day."

"You told her truth," said Ralph, "and did well to do so; though I must say, at the same time, that if I had a daughter, and my freedom, pleasure, nay, my very health and life, depended on her taking a husband whom I pointed out, I should hope it would not be necessary to advance any other arguments to induce her to consent to my wishes."

Bray looked at Ralph as if to see whether he spoke in earnest, and having nodded twice or thrice in unqualified assent to what had fallen from him, said:

"I must go up-stairs for a few minutes, to finish dressing. When I come down, I'll bring Madeline with me. Do you know I had a very strange dream last night, which I have not remembered till this instant! I dreamt that it was this morning, and you and I had been talking, as we have been this minute; that I went up-stairs, for the very purpose for which I am going now; and that as

I stretched out my hand to take Madeline's, and lead her down, the floor sunk with me, and after falling from such an indescribable and tremendous height as the imagination scarcely conceives, except in dreams, I alighted in a grave."

"And you awoke, and found you were lying on your back, or with your head hanging over the bedside, or suffering some pain from indigestion?" said Ralph. "Pshaw, Mr. Bray, do as I do (you will have the opportunity, now that a constant round of pleasure and enjoyment opens upon you), and, occupying yourself a little more by day, have no time to think of what you dream by night."

Ralph followed him, with a steady look, to the door; and, turning to the bridegroom, when they were again alone, said,

"Mark my words, Gride, you won't have to pay *his* annuity very long. You have the devil's luck in bargains, always. If he is not booked to make the long voyage before many months are past and gone, I wear an orange for a head!"

To this prophecy, so agreeable to his ears, Arthur returned no answer than a cackle of great delight. Ralph, throwing himself into a chair, they both sat waiting in profound silence. Ralph was thinking, with a sneer upon his lips, on the altered manner of Bray that day, and how soon their fellowship in a bad design had lowered his pride and established a familiarity between them, when his attentive ear caught the rustling of a female dress upon the stairs, and the footstep of a man.

"Wake up," he said, stamping his foot impatiently upon the ground, "and be something like life, man,

will you? They are here. Urge those dry old bones of yours this way — quick, man, quick!"

Gride shambled forward, and stood, leering and bowing, close by Ralph's side, when the door opened and there entered in haste — not Bray and his daughter, but Nicholas and his sister Kate.

If some tremendous apparition from the world of shadows had suddenly presented itself before him, Ralph Nickleby could not have been more thunder-stricken than he was by this surprise. His hands fell powerless by his side, he reeled back; and with open mouth, and a face of ashy paleness, stood gazing at them in speechless rage: his eyes so prominent, and his face so convulsed and changed by the passions which raged within him, that it would have been difficult to recognize in him the same stern, composed, hard-featured man he had been not a minute ago.

"The man that came to me last night," whispered Gride, plucking at his elbow. "The man that came to me last night!"

"I see," muttered Ralph, "I know! I might have guessed as much before. Across my every path, at every turn, go where I will, do what I may, he comes!"

The absence of all color from the face; the dilated nostril; the quivering of the lips which, though set firmly against each other, would not be still; showed what emotions were struggling for the mastery with Nicholas. But he kept them down, and gently pressing Kate's arm to reassure her, stood erect and undaunted, front to front with his unworthy relative.

As the brother and sister stood side by side, with a gallant bearing which became them well, a close likeness between them was apparent, which many, had they

only seen them apart, might have failed to remark. The air, carriage, and very look and expression of the brother were all reflected in the sister, but softened and refined to the nicest limit of feminine delicacy and attraction. More striking still, was some indefinable resemblance, in the face of Ralph, to both. While they had never looked more handsome, nor he more ugly; while they had never held themselves more proudly, nor he shrunk half so low; there never had been a time when this resemblance was so perceptible, or when all the worst characteristics of a face rendered coarse and harsh by evil thoughts were half so manifest as now.

"Away!" was the first word he could utter as he literally gnashed his teeth. "Away! What brings you here? — liar — scoundrel — dastard — thief!"

"I come here," said Nicholas in a low deep voice, "to save your victim if I can. Liar and scoundrel you are in every action of your life; theft is your trade; and double dastard you must be, or you were not here to-day. Hard words will not move me, nor would hard blows. Here I stand, and will, till I have done my errand."

"Girl!" said Ralph, "retire! We can use force to him, but I would not hurt you if I could help it. Retire, you weak and silly wench, and leave this dog to be dealt with as he deserves."

"I will not retire," cried Kate, with flashing eyes and the red blood mantling in her cheeks. "You will do him no hurt that he will not repay. You may use force with me; I think you will, for I *am* a girl, and that would well become you. But if I have a girl's weakness, I have a woman's heart, and it is not you who in a cause like this can turn that from its purpose."

"And what may your purpose be, most lofty lady?" said Ralph.

"To offer to the unhappy subject of your treachery, at this last moment," replied Nicholas, "a refuge and a home. If the near prospect of such a husband as you have provided, will not prevail upon her, I hope she may be moved by the prayers and entreaties of one of her own sex. At all events, they shall be tried. I myself, avowing to her father from whom I come and by whom I am commissioned, will render it an act of greater baseness, meanness, and cruelty in him if he still dares to force this marriage on. Here I wait to see him and his daughter. For this I came and brought my sister even into your presence. Our purpose is not to see or speak with you; therefore to you, we stoop to say no more."

"Indeed!" said Ralph. "You persist in remaining here, ma'am, do you?"

His niece's bosom heaved with the indignant excitement into which he had lashed her, but she gave him no reply.

"Now, Gride, see here," said Ralph. "This fellow — I grieve to say my brother's son: a reprobate and profligate, stained with every mean and selfish crime — this fellow, coming here to-day to disturb a solemn ceremony, and knowing that the consequence of his presenting himself in another man's house at such a time, and persisting in remaining there, must be his being kicked into the streets and dragged through them like the vagabond he is — this fellow, mark you, brings with him his sister as a protection, thinking we would not expose a silly girl to the degradation and indignity which is no novelty to him; and, even after

I have warned her of what must ensue, he still keeps her by him, as you see, and clings to her apron-strings like a cowardly boy to his mother's. Is this a pretty fellow to talk as big as you have heard him now!"

"And as I heard him last night," said Arthur Gride; "as I heard him last night when he sneaked into my house, and — he! he! he! — very soon sneaked out again, when I nearly frightened him to death. And *he* wanting to marry Miss Madeline too! Oh, dear! Is there anything else he'd like — anything else we can do for him, besides giving her up? Would he like his debts paid and his house furnished, and a few bank-notes for shaving paper if he shaves at all! He! he! he!"

"You will remain, girl, will you?" said Ralph, turning upon Kate again, "to be hauled down-stairs like a drunken drab — as I swear you shall if you stop here? No answer! Thank your brother for what follows. Gride, call down Bray — and not his daughter. Let them keep her, above."

"If you value your head," said Nicholas, taking up a position before the door, and speaking in the same low voice in which he had spoken before, and with no more outward passion than he had before displayed; "stay where you are!"

"Mind me, and not him, and call down Bray," said Ralph.

"Mind yourself rather than either of us, and stay where you are!" said Nicholas.

"Will you call down Bray?" cried Ralph.

"Remember that you come near me at your peril," said Nicholas.

Gride hesitated. Ralph, being, by this time, as furi-

ous as a baffled tiger made for the door, and, attempting to pass Kate, clasped her arm roughly with his hand. Nicholas, with his eyes darting fire, seized him by the collar. At that moment, a heavy body fell with great violence on the floor above, and, in an instant afterwards, was heard a most appalling and terrific scream.

They all stood still, and gazed upon each other. Scream succeeded scream; a heavy pattering of feet succeeded; and many shrill voices clamoring together were heard to cry, "He is dead!"

"Stand off!" cried Nicholas, letting loose all the passion he had restrained till now, "if this is what I scarcely dare to hope it is, you are caught, villains, in your own toils."

He burst from the room, and, darting up-stairs to the quarter from whence the noise proceeded, forced his way through a crowd of persons who quite filled a small bed-chamber, and found Bray lying on the floor quite dead; his daughter clinging to the body.

"How did this happen?" he cried, looking wildly about him.

Several voices answered together, that he had been observed, through the half-opened door, reclining in a strange and uneasy position upon a chair; that he had been spoken to, several times, and not answering, was supposed to be asleep, until some person going in and shaking him by the arm, he fell heavily to the ground and was discovered to be dead.

"Who is the owner of this house?" said Nicholas, hastily.

An elderly woman was pointed out to him; and to her he said, as he knelt down and gently unwound Made-

line's arms from the lifeless mass round which they were entwined: "I represent this lady's nearest friends, as her servant here knows, and must remove her from this dreadful scene. This is my sister to whose charge you confide her. My name and address are upon that card, and you shall receive from me all necessary directions for the arrangements that must be made. Stand aside, every one of you, and give me room and air for God's sake!"

The people fell back, scarce wondering more at what had just occurred, than at the excitement and impetuosity of him who spoke. Nicholas, taking the insensible girl in his arms, bore her from the chamber and down-stairs into the room he had just quitted, followed by his sister and the faithful servant, whom he charged to procure a coach directly while he and Kate bent over their beautiful charge and endeavored, but in vain, to restore her to animation. The girl performed her office with such expedition, that in a very few minutes the coach was ready.

Ralph Nickleby and Gride, stunned and paralyzed by the awful event which had so suddenly overthrown their schemes (it would not otherwise, perhaps, have made much impression on them), and carried away by the extraordinary energy and precipitation of Nicholas, which bore down all before him, looked on at these proceedings like men in a dream or trance. It was not until every preparation was made for Madeline's immediate removal that Ralph broke silence by declaring she should not be taken away.

"Who says so?" cried Nicholas, rising from his knee and confronting them, but still retaining Madeline's lifeless hand in his.

"I!" answered Ralph, hoarsely.

"Hush, hush!" cried the terrified Gride, catching him by the arm again. "Hear what he says."

"Aye!" said Nicholas, extending his disengaged hand in the air, "hear what he says. That both your debts are paid in the one great debt of nature — that the bond, due to-day at twelve, is now waste paper — that your contemplated fraud shall be discovered yet — that your schemes are known to man, and overthrown by Heaven — wretches, that he defies you both to do your worst!"

"This man," said Ralph, in a voice scarcely intelligible, "this man claims his wife, and he shall have her."

"That man claims what is not his, and he should not have her if he were fifty men, with fifty more to back him," said Nicholas.

"Who shall prevent him?"

"I will."

"By what right I should like to know," said Ralph. "By what right I ask?"

"By this right — that, knowing what I do, you dare not tempt me further," said Nicholas, "and by this better right — that those I serve, and with whom you would have done me base wrong and injury, are her nearest and her dearest friends. In their name I bear her hence. Give way!"

"One word!" cried Ralph, foaming at the mouth.

"Not one," replied Nicholas, "I will not hear of one — save this. Look to yourself, and heed this warning that I give you! Your day is past, and night is coming on" —

"My curse, my bitter, deadly, curse, upon you, boy!"

"Whence will curses come at your command? or what avails a curse or blessing from a man like you? I tell

you, that misfortune and discovery are thickening about your head; that the structures you have raised, through all your ill-spent life, are crumbling into dust; that your path is beset with spies; that this very day, ten thousand pounds of your hoarded wealth have gone in one great crash!"

"'Tis false!" cried Ralph, shrinking back.

"'Tis true, and you shall find it so. I have no more words to waste. Stand from the door. Kate, do you go first. Lay not a hand on her, or on that woman, or on me, or so much as brush their garments as they pass you by! — You let them pass and he blocks the door again!"

Arthur Gride happened to be in the door-way, but whether intentionally or from confusion was not quite apparent. Nicholas swung him away, with such violence as to cause him to spin round the room until he was caught by a sharp angle of the wall and there knocked down; and then taking his beautiful burden in his arms rushed out. No one cared to stop him, if any were so disposed. Making his way through a mob of people, whom a report of the circumstances had attracted round the house, and carrying Madeline, in his excitement, as easily as if she were an infant, he reached the coach in which Kate and the girl were already waiting, and, confiding his charge to them, jumped up beside the coachman and bade him drive away.

CHAPTER LV.

OF FAMILY MATTERS, CARES, HOPES, DISAPPOINTMENTS, AND SORROWS.

ALTHOUGH Mrs. Nickleby had been made acquainted by her son and daughter with every circumstance of Madeline Bray's history which was known to them; although the responsible situation in which Nicholas stood had been carefully explained to her, and she had been prepared, even for the possible contingency of having to receive the young lady in her own house — improbable as such a result had appeared only a few minutes before it came about — still, Mrs. Nickleby, from the moment when this confidence was first reposed in her, late on the previous evening, had remained in an unsatisfactory and profoundly mystified state, from which no explanations or arguments could relieve her, and which every fresh soliloquy and reflection only aggravated more and more.

"Bless my heart, Kate;" so the good lady argued; "if the Mr. Cheerybles don't want this young lady to be married, why don't they file a bill against the Lord Chancellor, make her a chancery ward, and shut her up in the Fleet prison for safety? — I have read of such things in the newspapers a hundred times — or, if they are so very fond of her as Nicholas says they are, why don't they marry her themselves — one of them I mean?

And even supposing they don't want her to be married, and don't want to marry her themselves, why in the name of wonder should Nicholas go about the world, forbidding people's banns?"

"I don't think you quite understand," said Kate, gently.

"Well I am sure, Kate, my dear, you're very polite!" replied Mrs. Nickleby. "I have been married myself I hope, and I have seen other people married. Not understand, indeed!"

"I know you have had great experience, dear mamma," said Kate; "I mean that perhaps you don't quite understand all the circumstances in this instance. We have stated them awkwardly, I dare say."

"That I dare say you have," retorted her mother, briskly. "That's very likely. I am not to be held accountable for that; though, at the same time, as the circumstances speak for themselves, I shall take the liberty, my love, of saying that I do understand them, and perfectly well too; whatever you and Nicholas may choose to think to the contrary. Why is such a great fuss made because this Miss Magdalen is going to marry somebody who is older than herself? Your poor papa was older than I was — four years and a half older. Jane Dibabs — the Dibabses lived in the beautiful little thatched white house one story high, covered all over with ivy and creeping plants, with an exquisite little porch with twining honeysuckles and all sorts of things: where the ear-wigs used to fall into one's tea on a summer evening, and always fell upon their backs and kicked dreadfully, and where the frogs used to get into the rushlight shades when one stopped all night, and sit up and look through the little holes like Christians — Jane Dibabs, *she* married

a man who was a great deal older than herself, and *would* marry him, notwithstanding all that could be said to the contrary, and she was so fond of him that nothing was ever equal to it. There was no fuss made about Jane Dibabs, and her husband was a most honorable and excellent man, and everybody spoke well of him. Then why should there be any fuss about this Magdalen?"

"Her husband is much older; he is not her own choice; his character is the very reverse of that which you have just described. Don't you see a broad distinction between the two cases?" said Kate.

To this, Mrs. Nickleby only replied that she durst say she was very stupid, indeed she had no doubt she was, for her own children almost as much as told her so, every day of her life; to be sure she was a little older than they, and perhaps some foolish people might think she ought reasonably to know best. However, no doubt she was wrong; of course she was — she always was — she couldn't be right, indeed — couldn't be expected to be — so she had better not expose herself any more; and to all Kate's conciliations and concessions for an hour ensuing, the good lady gave no other replies than — Oh, certainly — why did they ask *her* — *her* opinion was of no consequence — it didn't matter what *she* said — with many other rejoinders of the same class.

In this frame of mind (expressed, when she had become too resigned for speech, by nods of the head, upliftings of the eyes, and little beginnings of groans, converted, as they attracted attention, into short coughs), Mrs. Nickleby remained until Nicholas and Kate returned with the object of their solicitude; when, having by this time asserted her own importance, and becoming besides interested in the trials of one so young and beautiful, she

not only displayed the utmost zeal and solicitude, but took great credit to herself for recommending the course of procedure which her son had adopted: frequently declaring, with an expressive look, that it was very fortunate things were *as* they were: and hinting, that but for great encouragement and wisdom on her own part, they never could have been brought to that pass.

Not to strain the question whether Mrs. Nickleby had or had not any great hand in bringing matters about, it is unquestionable that she had strong ground for exultation. The brothers, on their return, bestowed such commendations on Nicholas for the part he had taken, and evinced so much joy at the altered state of events and the recovery of their young friend, from trials so great and dangers so threatening, that, as she more than once informed her daughter, she now considered the fortunes of the family "as good as" made. Mr. Charles Cheeryble, indeed, Mrs. Nickleby positively asserted, had, in the first transports of his surprise and delight, "as good as" said so. Without precisely explaining what this qualification meant, she subsided, whenever she mentioned the subject, into such a mysterious and important state, and had such visions of wealth and dignity in perspective, that (vague and clouded though they were) she was, at such times, almost as happy as if she had really been permanently provided for, on a scale of great splendor.

The sudden and terrible shock she had received, combined with the great affliction and anxiety of mind which she had, for a long time, endured, proved too much for Madeline's strength. Recovering from the state of stupefaction into which the sudden death of her father happily plunged her, she only exchanged that condition for one of dangerous and active illness. When the delicate

physical powers which have been sustained by an unnatural strain upon the mental energies and a resolute determination not to yield, at last give way, their degree of prostration is usually proportionate to the strength of the effort which has previously upheld them. Thus it was that the illness which fell on Madeline was of no slight or temporary nature, but one which, for a time, threatened her reason, and — scarcely worse — her life itself.

Who, slowly recovering from a disorder so severe and dangerous, could be insensible to the unremitting attentions of such a nurse as gentle, tender, earnest Kate? On whom could the sweet soft voice, the light step, the delicate hand, the quiet, cheerful, noiseless discharge of those thousand little offices of kindness and relief which we feel so deeply when we are ill, and forget so lightly when we are well — on whom could they make so deep an impression as on a young heart stored with every pure and true affection that women cherish; almost a stranger to the endearments and devotion of its own sex, save as it learnt them from itself; and rendered, by calamity and suffering, keenly susceptible of the sympathy so long unknown and so long sought in vain! What wonder that days became as years in knitting them together! What wonder, if with every hour of returning health, there came some stronger and sweeter recognition of the praises which Kate, when they recalled old scenes — they seemed old now, and to have been acted years ago — would lavish on her brother! Where would have been the wonder, even, if those praises had found a quick response in the breast of Madeline, and if, with the image of Nicholas so constantly recurring in the features of his sister that she could scarcely separate the

two, she had sometimes found it equally difficult to assign to each the feelings they had first inspired, and had imperceptibly mingled with her gratitude to Nicholas, some of that warmer feeling which she had assigned to Kate!

"My dear," Mrs. Nickleby would say, coming into the room with an elaborate caution, calculated to discompose the nerves of an invalid rather more than the entry of a horse-soldier at full gallop; "how do you find yourself to-night? I hope you are better."

"Almost well, mamma," Kate would reply, laying down her work, and taking Madeline's hand in hers.

"Kate!" Mrs. Nickleby would say, reprovingly, "don't talk so loud" (the worthy lady herself talking in a whisper that would have made the blood of the stoutest man, run cold in his veins).

Kate would take this reproof very quietly, and Mrs. Nickleby, making every board creak, and every thread rustle as she moved stealthily about, would add:

"My son Nicholas has just come home, and I have come, according to custom, my dear, to know, from your own lips, exactly how you are; for he won't take my account, and never will."

"He is later than usual to-night," perhaps Madeline would reply. "Nearly half an hour."

"Well, I never saw such people in all my life as you are, for time, up here!" Mrs. Nickleby would exclaim in great astonishment; "I declare I never did! I had not the least idea that Nicholas was after his time — not the smallest. Mr. Nickleby used to say — your poor papa, I am speaking of, Kate my dear — used to say, that appetite was the best clock in the world, but you have no appetite, my dear Miss Bray, I wish you had, and upon

my word I really think you ought to take something that would give you one—I am sure I don't know, but I have heard that two or three dozen native lobsters give an appetite, though that comes to the same thing after all, for I suppose you must have an appetite before you can take 'em. If I said lobsters, I meant oysters, but of course it's all the same, though really how you came to know about Nicholas" ——

"We happened to be just talking about him, mamma; that was it."

"You never seem to me, to be talking about anything else, Kate, and upon my word I am quite surprised at your being so very thoughtless. You can find subjects enough to talk about, sometimes, and when you know how important it is to keep up Miss Bray's spirits, and interest her, and all that, it really is quite extraordinary to me what can induce you to keep on prose, prose, prose, din, din, din, everlastingly, upon the same theme. You are a very kind nurse, Kate, and a very good one, and I know you mean very well; but I will say this — that if it wasn't for me, I really don't know what would become of Miss Bray's spirits, and so I tell the doctor every day. He says he wonders how I sustain my own, and I am sure I very often wonder myself how I can contrive to keep up as I do. Of course it's an exertion, but still, when I know how much depends upon me in this house, I am obliged to make it. There's nothing praiseworthy in that, but it's necessary, and I do it."

With that, Mrs. Nickleby would draw up a chair, and for some three quarters of an hour, run through a great variety of distracting topics in the most distracting manner possible: tearing herself away, at length, on the plea that she must now go and amuse Nicholas while he took

his supper. After a preliminary raising of his spirits with the information that she considered the patient decidedly worse, she would further cheer him up, by relating how dull, listless, and low-spirited Miss Bray was, because Kate foolishly talked about nothing else but him and family matters. When she had made Nicholas thoroughly comfortable with these and other inspiriting remarks, she would discourse at length, on the arduous duties she had performed that day; and, sometimes, be moved to tears in wondering how, if anything were to happen to herself, the family would ever get on without her.

At other times, when Nicholas came home at night, he would be accompanied by Mr. Frank Cheeryble, who was commissioned by the brothers to inquire how Madeline was, that evening. On such occasions (and they were of very frequent occurrence), Mrs. Nickleby deemed it of particular importance that she should have her wits about her; for, from certain signs and tokens which had attracted her attention, she shrewdly suspected that Mr. Frank, interested as his uncles were in Madeline, came quite as much to see Kate as to inquire after her; the more especially as the brothers were in constant communication with the medical man, came backwards and forwards very frequently themselves, and received a full report from Nicholas every morning. These were proud times for Mrs. Nickleby; never was anybody half so discreet and sage as she, or half so mysterious withal; and never were there such cunning generalship, and such unfathomable designs, as she brought to bear upon Mr. Frank, with the view of ascertaining whether her suspicions were well founded: and if so, of tantalizing him into taking her into his confidence and throwing him-

self upon her merciful consideration. Extensive was the artillery, heavy and light, which Mrs. Nickleby brought into play for the furtherance of these great schemes: various and opposite the means which she employed to bring about the end she had in view. At one time, she was all cordiality and ease; at another, all stiffness and frigidity. Now, she would seem to open her whole heart to her unhappy victim; the next time they met, she would receive him with the most distant and studious reserve, as if a new light had broken in upon her, and, guessing his intentions, she had resolved to check them in the bud; as if she felt it her bounden duty to act with Spartan firmness, and at once and forever to discourage hopes which never could be realized. At other times, when Nicholas was not there to overhear, and Kate was up-stairs busily tending her sick friend, the worthy lady would throw out dark hints of an intention to send her daughter to France for three or four years, or to Scotland for the improvement of her health impaired by her late fatigues, or to America on a visit, or anywhere that threatened a long and tedious separation. Nay, she even went so far as to hint, obscurely, at an attachment entertained for her daughter by the son of an old neighbor of theirs, one Horatio Peltirogus (a young gentleman who might have been, at that time, four years old, or thereabouts), and to represent it, indeed, as almost a settled thing between the families — only waiting for her daughter's final decision, to come off with the sanction of the church, and to the unspeakable happiness and content of all parties.

It was in the full pride and glory of having sprung this last mine one night, with extraordinary success, that Mrs. Nickleby took the opportunity of being left alone

with her son before retiring to rest, to sound him on the subject which so occupied her thoughts: not doubting that they could have but one opinion respecting it. To this end, she approached the question with divers laudatory and appropriate remarks touching the general amiability of Mr. Frank Cheeryble.

"You are quite right, mother," said Nicholas, "quite right. He is a fine fellow."

"Good-looking, too," said Mrs. Nickleby.

"Decidedly good-looking," answered Nicholas.

"What may you call his nose, now, my dear?" pursued Mrs. Nickleby, wishing to interest Nicholas in the subject to the utmost.

"Call it?" repeated Nicholas.

"Ah!" returned his mother, "what style of nose — what order of architecture, if one may say so. I am not very learned in noses. Do you call it a Roman or a Grecian?"

"Upon my word, mother," said Nicholas, laughing, "as well as I remember, I should call it a kind of Composite, or mixed nose. But I have no very strong recollection on the subject. If it will afford you any gratification, I'll observe it more closely, and let you know."

"I wish you would, my dear," said Mrs. Nickleby, with an earnest look.

"Very well," returned Nicholas. "I will."

Nicholas returned to the perusal of the book he had been reading, when the dialogue had gone thus far. Mrs. Nickleby, after stopping a little for consideration, resumed.

"He is very much attached to you, Nicholas, my dear."

Nicholas laughingly said, as he closed his book, that

he was glad to hear it, and observed that his mother seemed deep in their new friend's confidence already.

"Hem!" said Mrs. Nickleby. "I don't know about that, my dear, but I think it is very necessary that somebody should be in his confidence — highly necessary."

Elated by a look of curiosity from her son, and the consciousness of possessing a great secret, all to herself, Mrs. Nickleby went on with great animation:

"I am sure, my dear Nicholas, how you can have failed to notice it, is, to me, quite extraordinary; though I don't know why I should say that, either, because of course, as far as it goes, and to a certain extent, there is a great deal in this sort of thing, especially in this early stage, which, however clear it may be to females, can scarcely be expected to be so evident to men. I don't say, that I have any particular penetration in such matters. I may have; those about me should know best about that, and perhaps do know. Upon that point, I shall express no opinion — it wouldn't become me to do so — it's quite out of the question — quite."

Nicholas snuffed the candles, put his hands in his pockets, and, leaning back in his chair, assumed a look of patient suffering and melancholy resignation.

"I think it my duty, Nicholas, my dear," resumed his mother, "to tell you what I know: not only because you have a right to know it too, and to know everything that happens in this family, but because you have it in your power to promote and assist the thing very much; and there is no doubt that the sooner one can come to a clear understanding on such subjects, it is always better, every way. There are a great many things you might do; such as taking a walk in the garden sometimes, or sitting up-stairs in your own room for a little while, or making

believe to fall asleep occasionally, or pretending that you recollected some business, and going out for an hour or so, and taking Mr. Smike with you. These seem very slight things, and I dare say you will be amused at my making them of so much importance; at the same time, my dear, I can assure you (and you'll find this out, Nicholas, for yourself one of these days, if you ever fall in love with anybody: as I trust and hope you will, provided she is respectable and well conducted, and of course you'd never dream of falling in love with anybody who was not), I say, I can assure you that a great deal more depends upon these little things, than you would suppose possible. If your poor papa was alive, he would tell you how much depended on the parties being left alone. Of course, you are not to go out of the room as if you meant it and did it on purpose, but as if it was quite an accident, and to come back again in the same way. If you cough in the passage before you open the door, or whistle carelessly, or hum a tune, or something of that sort, to let them know you're coming, it's always better; because, of course, though it's not only natural but perfectly correct and proper under the circumstances, still it is very confusing if you interrupt young people when they are — when they are sitting on the sofa, and — and all that sort of thing: which is very nonsensical perhaps, but still they will do it."

The profound astonishment with which her son regarded her during this long address, gradually increasing as it approached its climax, in no way discomposed Mrs. Nickleby, but rather exalted her opinion of her own cleverness; therefore, merely stopping to remark, with much complacency, that she had fully expected him to be surprised, she entered on a vast quantity of circumstan-

tial evidence of a particularly incoherent and perplexing kind; the upshot of which, was, to establish, beyond the possibility of doubt, that Mr. Frank Cheeryble had fallen desperately in love with Kate.

"With whom?" cried Nicholas.

Mrs. Nickleby repeated, with Kate.

"What! *our* Kate — my sister!"

"Lord, Nicholas!" returned Mrs. Nickleby, "whose Kate should it be, if not ours; or what should I care about it, or take any interest in it for, if it was anybody but your sister?"

"Dear mother," said Nicholas, "surely it can't be!"

"Very good, my dear," replied Mrs. Nickleby, with great confidence. "Wait and see."

Nicholas had never, until that moment, bestowed a thought upon the remote possibility of such an occurrence as that which was now communicated to him; for, besides that he had been much from home of late and closely occupied with other matters, his own jealous fears had prompted the suspicion that some secret interest in Madeline, akin to that which he felt himself, occasioned those visits of Frank Cheeryble which had recently become so frequent. Even now, although he knew that the observation of an anxious mother was much more likely to be correct in such a case than his own, and although she reminded him of many little circumstances which, taken together, were certainly susceptible of the construction she triumphantly put upon them, he was not quite convinced but that they arose from mere good-natured thoughtless gallantry, which would have dictated the same conduct towards any other girl who was young and pleasing — at all events, he hoped so, and therefore tried to believe it.

"I am very much disturbed by what you tell me," said Nicholas, after a little reflection, "though I yet hope you may be mistaken."

"I don't understand why you should hope so," said Mrs. Nickleby, "I confess; but you may depend upon it I am not."

"What of Kate?" inquired Nicholas.

"Why that, my dear," returned Mrs. Nickleby, "is just the point upon which I am not yet satisfied. During this sickness, she has been constantly at Madeline's bedside — never were two people so fond of each other as they have grown — and to tell you the truth, Nicholas, I have rather kept her away now and then, because I think it's a good plan, and urges a young man on. He doesn't get too sure, you know."

She said this with such a mingling of high delight and self-congratulation, that it was inexpressibly painful to Nicholas to dash her hopes; but he felt that there was only one honorable course before him, and that he was bound to take it.

"Dear mother," he said kindly, "don't you see that if there were really any serious inclination on the part of Mr. Frank towards Kate, and we suffered ourselves for a moment to encourage it, we should be acting a most dishonorable and ungrateful part? I ask you if you don't see it, but I need not say, that I know you don't, or you would have been more strictly on your guard. Let me explain my meaning to you — remember how poor we are."

Mrs. Nickleby shook her head, and said, through her tears, that poverty was not a crime.

"No," said Nicholas, "and for that reason poverty should engender an honest pride, that it may not lead

and tempt us to unworthy actions, and that we may preserve the self-respect which a hewer of wood and drawer of water may maintain — and does better in maintaining than a monarch his. Think what we owe to these two brothers; remember what they have done, and what they do every day for us with a generosity and delicacy for which the devotion of our whole lives would be a most imperfect and inadequate return. What kind of return would that be which would be comprised in our permitting their nephew, their only relative, whom they regard as a son, and for whom it would be mere childishness to suppose they have not formed plans suitably adapted to the education he has had, and the fortune he will inherit — in our permitting him to marry a portionless girl: so closely connected with us, that the irresistible inference must be, that he was entrapped by a plot; that it was a deliberate scheme, and a speculation amongst us three. Bring the matter clearly before yourself, mother. Now, how would you feel, if they were married, and the brothers, coming here on one of those kind errands which bring them here so often, you had to break out to them the truth? Would you be at ease, and feel that you had played an open part?"

Poor Mrs. Nickleby, crying more and more, murmured that of course, Mr. Frank would ask the consent of his uncles first.

"Why, to be sure, that would place *him* in a better situation with them," said Nicholas, "but we should still be open to the same suspicions; the distance between us would still be as great; the advantages to be gained would still be as manifest as now. We may be reckoning without our host, in all this," he added more cheerfully, "and I trust, and almost believe we are. If it be

otherwise, I have that confidence in Kate that I know she will feel as I do — and in you, dear mother, to be assured that after a little consideration you will do the same."

After many more representations and entreaties, Nicholas obtained a promise from Mrs. Nickleby that she would try all she could, to think as he did; and that if Mr. Frank persevered in his attentions she would endeavor to discourage them, or, at the least, would render him no countenance or assistance. He determined to forbear mentioning the subject to Kate, until he was quite convinced that there existed a real necessity for his doing so; and resolved to assure himself, as well as he could by close personal observation, of the exact position of affairs. This was a very wise resolution, but he was prevented from putting it in practice, by a new source of anxiety and uneasiness.

Smike became alarmingly ill; so reduced and exhausted that he could scarcely move from room to room without assistance; and so worn and emaciated, that it was painful to look upon him. Nicholas was warned, by the same medical authority to whom he had at first appealed, that the last chance and hope of his life depended on his being instantly removed from London. That part of Devonshire in which Nicholas had been himself bred, was named as the most favorable spot; but this advice was cautiously coupled with the information, that whoever accompanied him thither, must be prepared for the worst; for every token of rapid consumption had appeared, and he might never return alive.

The kind brothers, who were acquainted with the poor creature's sad history, despatched old Tim to be present

at this consultation. That same morning, Nicholas was summoned by brother Charles into his private room, and thus addressed:

"My dear sir, no time must be lost. This lad shall not die, if such human means as we can use, can save his life; neither shall he die alone, and in a strange place. Remove him to-morrow morning, see that he has every comfort that his situation requires, and don't leave him — don't leave him, my dear sir, until you know that there is no longer any immediate danger. It would be hard, indeed, to part you now — no, no, no! Tim shall wait upon you to-night, sir; Tim shall wait upon you to-night with a parting word or two. Brother Ned, my dear fellow, Mr. Nickleby waits to shake hands and say good-by; Mr. Nickleby won't be long gone; this poor chap will soon get better — very soon get better — and then he'll find out some nice homely country people to leave him with, and will go backwards and forwards sometimes — backwards and forwards you know, Ned — and there's no cause to be down-hearted, for he'll very soon get better, very soon, won't he — won't he, Ned?"

What Tim Linkinwater said, or what he brought with him that night, needs not to be told. Next morning Nicholas and his feeble companion began their journey.

And who but one — and that one he who, but for those who crowded round him then, had never met a look of kindness, or known a word of pity — could tell what agony of mind, what blighted thoughts, what unavailing sorrow, were involved in that sad parting!

"See," cried Nicholas eagerly, as he looked from the coach-window, "they are at the corner of the lane still!

And now there's Kate — poor Kate, whom you said you couldn't bear to say good-by to — waving her handkerchief. Don't go, without one gesture of farewell to Kate!"

"I cannot make it!" cried his trembling companion falling back in his seat and covering his eyes. "Do you see her now? Is she there still?"

"Yes, yes!" said Nicholas earnestly. "There! She waves her hand again! I have answered it for you — and now they are out of sight. Do not give way so bitterly, dear friend, don't. You will meet them all again."

He whom he thus encouraged, raised his withered hands and clasped them fervently together.

"In heaven — I humbly pray to God in heaven!"

It sounded like the prayer of a broken heart.

CHAPTER LVI.

RALPH NICKLEBY, BAFFLED BY HIS NEPHEW IN HIS LATE DESIGN, HATCHES A SCHEME OF RETALIATION WHICH ACCIDENT SUGGESTS TO HIM, AND TAKES INTO HIS COUNSELS A TRIED AUXILIARY.

THE course which these adventures shape out for themselves, and imperatively call upon the historian to observe, now demands that they should revert to the point they attained previous to the commencement of the last chapter, when Ralph Nickleby and Arthur Gride were left together in the house where death had so suddenly reared his dark and heavy banner.

With clenched hands, and teeth ground together so firm and tight that no locking of the jaws could have fixed and riveted them more securely, Ralph stood, for some minutes, in the attitude in which he had last addressed his nephew: breathing heavily, but as rigid and motionless in other respects as if he had been a brazen statue. After a time, he began, by slow degrees, as a man rousing himself from heavy slumber, to relax. For a moment he shook his clasped fist towards the door by which Nicholas had disappeared; and then thrusting it into his breast, as if to repress by force even this show of passion, turned round and confronted the less hardy usurer, who had not yet risen from the ground.

The cowering wretch, who still shook in every limb, and whose few gray hairs trembled and quivered on his head with abject dismay, tottered to his feet as he met Ralph's eye, and, shielding his face with both hands, protested, while he crept towards the door, that it was no fault of his.

"Who said it was, man?" returned Ralph, in a suppressed voice. "Who said it was?"

"You looked as if you thought I was to blame," said Gride, timidly.

"Pshaw!" Ralph muttered, forcing a laugh. "I blame him for not living an hour longer — one hour longer would have been long enough — I blame no one else."

"N — n — no one else?" said Gride.

"Not for this mischance," replied Ralph. "I have an old score to clear with that — that young fellow who has carried off your mistress; but that has nothing to do with his blustering just now, for we should soon have been quit of him, but for this cursed accident."

There was something so unnatural in the calmness with which Ralph Nickleby spoke, when coupled with the face, the expression of the features, to which every nerve and muscle, as it twitched and throbbed with a spasm whose workings no effort could conceal, gave, every instant, some new and frightful aspect — there was something so unnatural and ghastly in the contrast between his harsh, slow, steady voice (only altered by a certain halting of the breath which made him pause between almost every word like a drunken man bent upon speaking plainly), and these evidences of the most intense and violent passions, and the struggle he made to keep them under — that if the dead body which lay

above, had stood, instead of him, before the cowering Gride, it could scarcely have presented a spectacle which would have terrified him more.

"The coach," said Ralph after a time, during which he had struggled like some strong man against a fit. "We came in a coach. Is it — waiting?"

Gride gladly availed himself of the pretext for going to the window to see. Ralph, keeping his face steadily the other way, tore at his shirt with the hand which he had thrust into his breast, and muttered in a hoarse whisper:

"Ten thousand pounds! He said ten thousand! The precise sum paid in but yesterday for the two mortgages, and which would have gone out again, at heavy interest, to-morrow. If that house has failed, and he the first to bring the news! — Is the coach there?"

"Yes, yes," said Gride, startled by the fierce tone of the inquiry. "It's here. Dear, dear, what a fiery man you are!"

"Come here," said Ralph, beckoning to him. "We mustn't make a show of being disturbed. We'll go down arm in arm."

"But you pinch me black and blue," urged Gride.

Ralph let him go, impatiently, and descending the stairs with his usual firm and heavy tread, got into the coach. Arthur Gride followed. After looking doubtfully at Ralph when the man asked where he was to drive, and finding that he remained silent, and expressed no wish upon the subject, Arthur mentioned his own house, and thither they proceeded.

On their way, Ralph sat in the farthest corner with folded arms, and uttered not a word. With his chin sunk upon his breast, and his downcast eyes quite hid-

den by the contraction of his knotted brows, he might have been asleep for any sign of consciousness he gave, until the coach stopped, when he raised his head, and, glancing through the window, inquired what place that was.

"My house," answered the disconsolate Gride, affected perhaps by its loneliness. "Oh dear! my house."

"True," said Ralph. "I have not observed the way we came. I should like a glass of water. You have that in the house, I suppose?"

"You shall have a glass of — of anything you like," answered Gride, with a groan. "It's no use knocking, coachman. Ring the bell!"

The man rang, and rang, and rang again; then, knocked until the street reëchoed with the sounds; then, listened at the key-hole of the door. Nobody came. The house was silent as the grave.

"How's this?" said Ralph impatiently.

"Peg is so very deaf," answered Gride with a look of anxiety and alarm. "Oh dear! Ring again, coachman. She *sees* the bell."

Again the man rang and knocked, and knocked and rang again. Some of the neighbors threw up their windows, and called across the street to each other that old Gride's housekeeper must have dropped down dead. Others collected round the coach, and gave vent to various surmises; some held that she had fallen asleep; some, that she had burnt herself to death; some that she had got drunk; and one very fat man that she had seen something to eat which had frightened her so much (not being used to it) that she had fallen into a fit. This last suggestion particularly delighted the by-standers, who cheered it rather uproariously, and were, with some dif-

ficulty, deterred from dropping down the area and breaking open the kitchen door to ascertain the fact. Nor was this all. Rumors having gone abroad, that Arthur was to be married that morning, very particular inquiries were made after the bride, who was held by the majority to be disguised in the person of Mr. Ralph Nickleby, which gave rise to much jocose indignation at the public appearance of a bride in boots and pantaloons, and called forth a great many hoots and groans. At length, the two money-lenders obtained shelter in a house next door, and, being accommodated with a ladder, clambered over the wall of the back yard, which was not a high one, and descended in safety on the other side.

"I am almost afraid to go in, I declare," said Arthur, turning to Ralph when they were alone. "Suppose she should be murdered — lying with her brains knocked out by a poker — eh?"

"Suppose she were," said Ralph. "I tell you, I wish such things were more common than they are, and more easily done. You may stare and shiver — I do!"

He applied himself to a pump in the yard; and, having taken a deep draught of water and flung a quantity on his head and face, regained his accustomed manner and led the way into the house: Gride following close at his heels.

It was the same dark place as ever: every room dismal and silent as it was wont to be, and every ghostly article of furniture in its customary place. The iron heart of the grim old clock, undisturbed by all the noise without, still beat heavily within its dusty case; the tottering presses slunk from the sight, as usual, in their melancholy corners; the echoes of footsteps returned the same dreary sound; the long-legged spider paused in

his nimble run, and, scared by the sight of men in that his dull domain, hung motionless on the wall, counterfeiting death until they should have passed him by.

From cellar to garret went the two usurers, opening every creaking door and looking into every deserted room. But no Peg was there. At last, they sat them down in the apartment which Arthur Gride usually inhabited, to rest after their search.

"The hag is out, on some preparation for your wedding festivities, I suppose," said Ralph, preparing to depart. "See here! I destroy the bond; we shall never need it now."

Gride, who had been peering narrowly about the room, fell, at that moment, upon his knees before a large chest, and uttered a terrible yell.

"How now?" said Ralph looking sternly round.

"Robbed! robbed!" screamed Arthur Gride.

"Robbed! of money?"

"No, no, no. Worse! far worse!"

"Of what then?" demanded Ralph.

"Worse than money, worse than money!" cried the old man, casting the papers out of the chest, like some beast tearing up the earth. "She had better have stolen money — all my money — I haven't much! She had better have made me a beggar, than have done this!"

"Done what?" said Ralph. "Done what, you devil's dotard?"

Still Gride made no answer, but tore and scratched among the papers, and yelled and screeched like a fiend in torment.

"There is something missing, you say," said Ralph, shaking him furiously by the collar. "What is it?"

"Papers, deeds. I am a ruined man — lost — lost! I am robbed, I am ruined! She saw me reading it — reading it of late — I did very often — she watched me — saw me put it in the box that fitted into this — the box is gone — she has stolen it. — Damnation seize her, she has robbed me!"

"Of *what!*" cried Ralph, on whom a sudden light appeared to break, for his eyes flashed and his frame trembled with agitation as he clutched Gride by his bony arm. "Of what?"

"She don't know what it is; she can't read!" shrieked Gride, not heeding the inquiry. "There's only one way in which money can be made of it, and that is by taking it to *her*. Somebody will read it for her and tell her what to do. She and her accomplice will get money for it and be let off besides; they'll make a merit of it — say they found it — knew it — and be evidence against me. The only person it will fall upon, is me — me — me!"

"Patience!" said Ralph, clutching him still tighter and eying him with a sidelong look, so fixed and eager as sufficiently to denote that he had some hidden purpose in what he was about to say. "Hear reason. She can't have been gone long. I'll call the police. Do you but give information of what she has stolen, and they'll lay hands upon her, trust me. — Help — help!"

"No — no — no," screamed the old man putting his hand on Ralph's mouth. "I can't, I daren't."

"Help! help!" cried Ralph.

"No, no, no," shrieked the other, stamping on the ground with the energy of a madman. "I tell you no. I daren't — I daren't!"

"Daren't make this robbery public?" said Ralph.

"No!" rejoined Gride, wringing his hands. "Hush! Hush! Not a word of this; not a word must be said. I am undone. Whichever way I turn, I am undone. I am betrayed. I shall be given up. I shall die in Newgate!"

With frantic exclamations such as these, and with many others in which fear, grief, and rage, were strangely blended, the panic-stricken wretch gradually subdued his first loud outcry, until it had softened down into a low despairing moan, checkered now and then by a howl, as, going over such papers as were left in the chest, he discovered some new loss. With very little excuse for departing so abruptly, Ralph left him, and, greatly disappointing the loiterers outside the house by telling them there was nothing the matter, got into the coach and was driven to his own home.

A letter lay on his table. He let it lie there, for some time, as if he had not the courage to open it, but at length did so and turned deadly pale.

"The worst has happened," he said, "the house has failed. I see — the rumor was abroad in the City last night, and reached the ears of those merchants. Well — well!"

He strode violently up and down the room and stopped again.

"Ten thousand pounds! And only lying there for a day — for one day! How many anxious years, how many pinching days and sleepless nights, before I scraped together that ten thousand pounds! — Ten thousand pounds! How many proud painted dames would have fawned and smiled, and how many spendthrift blockheads done me lip-service to my face and cursed me in their hearts, while I turned that ten

thousand pounds into twenty! While I ground, and pinched, and used these needy borrowers for my pleasure and profit, what smooth-tongued speeches, and courteous looks, and civil letters, they would have given me! The cant of the lying world is, that men like me compass our riches by dissimulation and treachery: by fawning, cringing, and stooping. Why, how many lies, what mean and abject evasions, what humbled behavior from upstarts who, but for my money, would spurn me aside as they do their betters every day, would that ten thousand pounds have brought me in! — Grant that I had doubled it — made cent. per cent. — for every sovereign told another — there would not be one piece of money in all the heap which wouldn't represent ten thousand mean and paltry lies, told — not by the money-lender, oh no! but by the money-borrowers — your liberal, thoughtless, generous, dashing folks, who wouldn't be so mean as save a sixpence for the world!"

Striving, as it would seem, to lose part of the bitterness of his regrets in the bitterness of these other thoughts, Ralph continued to pace the room. There was less and less of resolution in his manner as his mind gradually reverted to his loss; at length, dropping into his elbow-chair and grasping its sides so firmly that they creaked again, he said:

"The time has been when nothing could have moved me like the loss of this great sum — nothing — for births, deaths, marriages, and all the events which are of interest to most men, have (unless they are connected with gain or loss of money) no interest for me. But now, I swear, I mix up with the loss, his triumph in telling it. If he had brought it about, — I almost feel as if he had — I couldn't hate him more. Let me

but retaliate upon him, by degrees, however slow — let me but begin to get the better of him, let me but turn the scale — and I can bear it."

His meditations were long and deep. They terminated in his despatching a letter by Newman, addressed to Mr. Squeers at the Saracen's Head, with instructions to inquire whether he had arrived in town, and, if so, to wait an answer. Newman brought back the information that Mr. Squeers had come by mail that morning, and had received the letter in bed; but that he sent his duty, and word that he would get up and wait upon Mr. Nickleby directly.

The interval between the delivery of this message, and the arrival of Mr. Squeers, was very short; but, before he came, Ralph had suppressed every sign of emotion, and once more regained the hard, immovable, inflexible manner which was habitual to him, and to which, perhaps, was ascribable no small part of the influence which, over many men of no very strong prejudices on the score of morality, he could exert, almost at will.

"Well, Mr. Squeers," he said, welcoming that worthy with his accustomed smile, of which a sharp look and a thoughtful frown were part and parcel, — "how do *you* do?"

"Why, sir," said Mr. Squeers, "I'm pretty well. So's the family, and so's the boys, except for a sort of rash as is a-running through the school, and rather puts 'em off their feed. But it's a ill wind as blows no good to nobody; that's what I always say when them lads has a wisitation. A wisitation, sir, is the lot of mortality. Mortality itself, sir, is a wisitation. The world is chock full of wisitations; and if a boy repines at a wisitation and makes you uncomfortable with his noise, he must

have his head punched. That's going according to the scripter, that is."

"Mr. Squeers," said Ralph, dryly.

"Sir."

"We'll avoid these precious morsels of morality if you please, and talk of business."

"With all my heart, sir," rejoined Squeers, "and first let me say" ——

"First let *me* say, if you please —— Noggs!"

Newman presented himself when the summons had been twice or thrice repeated, and asked if his master called.

"I did. Go to your dinner. And go at once. Do you hear?"

"It a'n't time," said Newman, doggedly.

"My time is yours, and I say it is," returned Ralph.

"You alter it every day," said Newman. "It isn't fair."

"You don't keep many cooks, and can easily apologize to them for the trouble," retorted Ralph. "Begone, sir!"

Ralph not only issued this order in his most peremptory manner, but, under pretence of fetching some papers from the little office, saw it obeyed, and, when Newman had left the house, chained the door, to prevent the possibility of his returning secretly, by means of his latch-key.

"I have reason to suspect that fellow," said Ralph, when he returned to his own office. "Therefore until I have thought of the shortest and least troublesome way of ruining him, I hold it best to keep him at a distance."

"It wouldn't take much to ruin him, I should think," said Squeers, with a grin.

"Perhaps not," answered Ralph. "Nor to ruin a great many people whom I know. You were going to say?" ——

Ralph's summary and matter-of-course way of holding up this example, and throwing out the hint that followed it, had evidently an effect (as doubtless it was designed to have) upon Mr. Squeers, who said, after a little hesitation and in a much more subdued tone —

"Why, what I was going to say, sir, is, that this here business regarding of that ungrateful and hard-hearted chap, Snawley senior, puts me out of my way, and occasions a inconveniency quite unparalleled, besides, as I may say, making, for whole weeks together, Mrs. Squeers a perfect widder. It's a pleasure to me to act with you, of course."

"Of course," said Ralph, dryly.

"Yes, I say of course," resumed Mr. Squeers, rubbing his knees, "but at the same time, when one comes, as I do now, better than two hundred and fifty mile to take a afferdavid, it does put a man out a good deal, letting alone the risk."

"And where may the risk be, Mr. Squeers?" said Ralph.

"I said, letting alone the risk," replied Squeers, evasively.

"And I said, where was the risk?"

"I wasn't complaining, you know, Mr. Nickleby," pleaded Squeers. "Upon my word I never see such a" ——

"I ask you where is the risk?" repeated Ralph, emphatically.

"Where the risk?" returned Squeers, rubbing his knees still harder. "Why, it a'n't necessary to mention

— certain subjects is best awoided. Oh, you know what risk I mean."

"How often have I told you," said Ralph, "and how often am I to tell you, that you run no risk? What have you sworn, or what are you asked to swear, but that at such and such time a boy was left with you in the name of Smike; that he was at your school for a given number of years, was lost under such and such circumstances, is now found, and has been identified by you in such and such keeping. This is all true — is it not?"

"Yes," replied Squeers, "that's all true."

"Well, then," said Ralph, "what risk do you run? Who swears to a lie but Snawley — a man whom I have paid much less than I have you?"

"He certainly did it cheap, did Snawley," observed Squeers.

"He did it cheap!" retorted Ralph, testily, "yes, and he did it well, and carries it off with a hypocritical face and a sanctified air, but you — risk! What do you mean by risk? The certificates are all genuine, Snawley *had* another son, he *has* been married twice, his first wife *is* dead, none but her ghost could tell that she didn't write that letter, none but Snawley himself can tell that this is not his son, and that his son is food for worms! The only perjury is Snawley's, and I fancy he is pretty well used to it. Where's your risk?"

"Why, you know," said Squeers, fidgeting in his chair, "if you come to that, I might say where's yours?"

"You might say where's mine!" returned Ralph; "you may say where's mine. I don't appear in the business — neither do you. All Snawley's interest is to stick well to the story he has told; and all his risk is, to

depart from it in the least. Talk of *your* risk in the conspiracy!"

"I say," remonstrated Squeers, looking uneasily round; "don't call it that — just as a favor, don't."

"Call it what you like," said Ralph, irritably, "but attend to me. This tale was originally fabricated as a means of annoyance against one who hurt your trade and half cudgelled you to death, and to enable you to obtain repossession of a half-dead drudge, whom you wished to regain, because, while you wreaked your vengeance on him for his share in the business, you knew that the knowledge that he was again in your power would be the best punishment you could inflict upon your enemy. Is that so, Mr. Squeers?"

"Why, sir," returned Squeers, almost overpowered by the determination which Ralph displayed to make everything tell against him, and by his stern unyielding manner, "in a measure it was."

"What does that mean?" said Ralph.

"Why, in a measure, means," returned Squeers, "as it may be, that it wasn't all on my account, because you had some old grudge to satisfy, too."

"If I had not had," said Ralph, in no way abashed by the reminder, "do you think I should have helped you?"

"Why no, I don't suppose you would," Squeers replied. "I only wanted that point to be all square and straight between us."

"How can it ever be otherwise?" retorted Ralph. "Except that the account is against me, for I spend money to gratify my hatred, and you pocket it, and gratify yours at the same time. You are, at least, as avaricious as you are revengeful — so am I. Which is

best off? You, who win money and revenge, at the same time and by the same process, and who are, at all events, sure of money, if not of revenge; or I, who am only sure of spending money in any case, and can but win bare revenge at last?"

As Mr. Squeers could only answer this proposition by shrugs and smiles, Ralph bade him be silent, and thankful that he was so well off; and then, fixing his eyes steadily upon him, proceeded to say:

First, that Nicholas had thwarted him in a plan he had formed for the disposal in marriage of a certain young lady, and had, in the confusion attendant on her father's sudden death, secured that lady himself, and borne her off in triumph.

Secondly, that by some will or settlement — certainly by some instrument in writing, which must contain the young lady's name, and could be, therefore, easily selected from others, if access to the place where it was deposited were once secured — she was entitled to property which, if the existence of this deed ever became known to her, would make her husband (and Ralph represented that Nicholas was certain to marry her) a rich and prosperous man, and most formidable enemy.

Thirdly, that this deed had been, with others, stolen from one who had himself obtained or concealed it fraudulently, and who feared to take any steps for its recovery; and that he (Ralph) knew the thief.

To all this Mr. Squeers listened, with greedy ears that devoured every syllable, and with his one eye and his mouth wide open: marvelling for what special reason he was honored with so much of Ralph's confidence, and to what it all tended.

"Now," said Ralph, leaning forward, and placing his

hand on Squeers's arm, "hear the design which I have conceived, and which I must — I say, must, if I can ripen it — have carried into execution. No advantage can be reaped from this deed, whatever it is, save by the girl herself, or her husband; and the possession of this deed by one or other of them is indispensable to any advantage being gained. *That*, I have discovered beyond the possibility of doubt. I want that deed brought here, that I may give the man who brings it, fifty pounds in gold, and burn it to ashes before his face."

Mr. Squeers, after following with his eye the action of Ralph's hand towards the fire-place as if he were at that moment consuming the paper, drew a long breath, and said:

"Yes; but who's to bring it?"

"Nobody, perhaps, for much is to be done before it can be got at," said Ralph. "But if anybody — you!"

Mr. Squeers's first tokens of consternation, and his flat relinquishment of the task, would have staggered most men, if they had not immediately occasioned an utter abandonment of the proposition. On Ralph, they produced not the slightest effect. Resuming, when the school-master had quite talked himself out of breath, as coolly as if he had never been interrupted, Ralph proceeded to expatiate on such features of the case as he deemed it most advisable to lay the greatest stress on.

These were, the age, decrepitude, and weakness of Mrs. Sliderskew; the great improbability of her having any accomplice or even acquaintance: taking into account her secluded habits, and her long residence in such a house as Gride's; the strong reason there was to suppose that the robbery was not the result of a concerted plan: otherwise she would have watched an opportunity

of carrying off a sum of money; the difficulty she would be placed in when she began to think on what she had done, and found herself encumbered with documents of whose nature she was utterly ignorant; and the comparative ease with which somebody, with a full knowledge of her position, obtaining access to her, and working on her fears, if necessary, might worm himself into her confidence, and obtain, under one pretence or another, free possession of the deed. To these were added such considerations, as the constant residence of Mr. Squeers at a long distance from London, which rendered his association with Mrs. Sliderskew a mere masquerading frolic, in which nobody was likely to recognize him, either at the time or afterwards; the impossibility of Ralph's undertaking the task himself, he being already known to her by sight; and various comments on the uncommon tact and experience of Mr. Squeers: which would make his over-reaching one old woman, a mere matter of child's play and amusement. In addition to these influences and persuasions, Ralph drew, with his utmost skill and power, a vivid picture of the defeat which Nicholas would sustain, should they succeed, in linking himself to a beggar, where he expected to wed an heiress — glanced at the immeasurable importance it must be to a man situated as Squeers, to preserve such a friend as himself — dwelt on a long train of benefits, conferred since their first acquaintance, when he had reported favorably of his treatment of a sickly boy who had died under his hands (and whose death was very convenient to Ralph and his clients, but this he did *not* say) — and finally hinted that the fifty pounds might be increased to seventy-five, or, in the event of very great success, even to a hundred.

These arguments at length concluded, Mr. Squeers crossed his legs, uncrossed them, scratched his head, rubbed his eye, examined the palms of his hands, and bit his nails, and after exhibiting many other signs of restlessness and indecision, asked "whether one hundred pound was the highest that Mr. Nickleby could go." Being answered in the affirmative, he became restless again, and, after some thought, and an unsuccessful inquiry "whether he couldn't go another fifty," said he supposed he must try and do the most he could for a friend: which was always his maxim, and therefore he undertook the job.

"But how are you to get at the woman?" he said; "that's what it is as puzzles me."

"I may not get at her at all," replied Ralph, "but I'll try. I have hunted people in this city, before now, who have been better hid than she; and I know quarters in which a guinea or two, carefully spent, will often solve darker riddles than this — aye, and keep them close too, if need be! I hear my man ringing at the door. We may as well part. You had better not come to and fro, but wait till you hear from me."

"Good!" returned Squeers. "I say! If you shouldn't find her out, you'll pay expenses at the Saracen, and something for loss of time?"

"Well," said Ralph, testily; "yes! You have nothing more to say?"

Squeers shaking his head, Ralph accompanied him to the street-door, and, audibly wondering, for the edification of Newman, why it was fastened as if it were night, let him in and Squeers out, and returned to his own room.

"Now!" he muttered, "Come what come may, for

the present I am firm and unshaken. Let me but retrieve this one small portion of my loss and disgrace; let me but defeat him in this one hope, dear to his heart as I know it must be; let me but do this; and it shall be the first link in such a chain, which I will wind about him, as never man forged yet."

CHAPTER LVII.

HOW RALPH NICKLEBY'S AUXILIARY WENT ABOUT HIS WORK, AND HOW HE PROSPERED WITH IT.

It was a dark, wet, gloomy night in autumn, when in an upper room of a mean house situated in an obscure street or rather court near Lambeth, there sat, all alone, a one-eyed man grotesquely habited, either for lack of better garments or for purposes of disguise, in a loose great-coat, with arms half as long again as his own, and a capacity of breadth and length which would have admitted of his winding himself in it, head and all, with the utmost ease, and without any risk of straining the old and greasy material of which it was composed.

So attired, and in a place so far removed from his usual haunts and occupations, and so very poor and wretched in its character, perhaps Mrs. Squeers herself would have had some difficulty in recognizing her lord: quickened though her natural sagacity doubtless would have been, by the affectionate yearnings and impulses of a tender wife. But Mrs. Squeers's lord it was; and in a tolerably disconsolate mood Mrs. Squeers's lord appeared to be, as, helping himself from a black bottle which stood on the table beside him, he cast round the chamber a look, in which very slight regard for the objects within view was plainly mingled with some re-

gretful and impatient recollection of distant scenes and persons.

There were, certainly, no particular attractions, either in the room over which the glance of Mr. Squeers so discontentedly wandered, or in the narrow street into which it might have penetrated, if he had thought fit to approach the window. The attic-chamber in which he sat, was bare and mean; the bedstead, and such few other articles of necessary furniture as it contained, were of the commonest description, in a most crazy state, and of a most uninviting appearance. The street was muddy, dirty, and deserted. Having but one outlet, it was traversed by few but the inhabitants at any time; and the night being one of those on which most people are glad to be within doors, it now presented no other signs of life than the dull glimmering of poor candles from the dirty windows, and few sounds but the pattering of the rain, and occasionally the heavy closing of some creaking door.

Mr. Squeers continued to look disconsolately about him, and to listen to these noises in profound silence, broken only by the rustling of his large coat, as he now and then moved his arm to raise his glass to his lips — Mr. Squeers continued to do this for some time, until the increasing gloom warned him to snuff the candle. Seeming to be slightly roused by this exertion, he raised his eyes to the ceiling, and fixing them upon some uncouth and fantastic figures, traced upon it by the wet and damp which had penetrated through the roof, broke into the following soliloquy:

"Well, this is a pretty go, is this here! — an uncommon pretty go! Here have I been, a matter of how many weeks — hard upon six — a-follering up this here

blessed old dowager petty larcenerer," — Mr. Squeers delivered himself of this epithet with great difficulty and effort — " and Dotheboys Hall a-running itself regularly to seed the while ! that's the worst of ever being in with a owdacious chap like that old Nickleby. You never know when he's done with you, and if you're in for a penny, you're in for a pound."

This remark, perhaps, reminded Mr. Squeers that he was in for a hundred pound, at any rate his countenance relaxed, and he raised his glass to his mouth with an air of greater enjoyment of its contents than he had before evinced.

" I never see," soliloquized Mr. Squeers in continuation, " I never see nor come across such a file as that old Nickleby — never ! He's out of everybody's depth, he is. He's what you may call a rasper, is Nickleby. To see how sly and cunning he grubbed on, day after day, a-worming and plodding and tracing and turning and twining of hisself about, till he found out where this precious Mrs. Peg was hid, and cleared the ground for me to work upon — creeping and crawling and gliding, like a ugly, old, bright-eyed, stagnation-blooded adder ! Ah ! He'd have made a good un in our line, but it would have been too limited for him; his genius would have busted all bonds, and coming over every obstacle, broke down all before it, till it erected itself into a monneyment of — Well, I'll think of the rest, and say it when convenient."

Making a halt in his reflections at this place, Mr. Squeers again put his glass to his lips, and drawing a dirty letter from his pocket, proceeded to con over its contents with the air of a man who had read it very often, and now refreshed his memory rather in the ab-

sence of better amusement than for any specific information.

"The pigs is well," said Mr. Squeers, "the cows is well, and the boys is bobbish. Young Sprouter has been a-winking, has he? I'll wink him when I get back. 'Cobbey would persist in sniffing while he was a-eating his dinner, and said that the beef was so strong it made him.' — Very good, Cobbey, we'll see if we can't make you sniff a little without beef. 'Pitcher was took with another fever,' — of course he was — 'and being fetched by his friends, died the day after he got home,' — of course he did, and out of aggravation; it's part of a deep-laid system. There a'n't another chap in the school but that boy as would have died exactly at the end of the quarter: taking it out of me to the very last, and then carrying his spite to the utmost extremity. 'The juniorest Palmer said he wished he was in heaven,' — I really don't know, I do *not* know what's to be done with that young fellow; he's always a-wishing something horrid. He said, once, he wished he was a donkey, because then he wouldn't have a father as didn't love him! — pretty wicious that for a child of six!"

Mr. Squeers was so much moved by the contemplation of this hardened nature in one so young, that he angrily put up the letter, and sought, in a new train of ideas, a subject of consolation.

"It's a long time to have been a-lingering in London," he said; "and this is a precious hole to come and live in, even if it has been only for a week or so. Still, one hundred pound is five boys, and five boys takes a whole year to pay one hundred pound, and there's their keep to be substracted, besides. There's nothing lost, neither, by

one's being here; because the boys' money comes in just the same as if I was at home, and Mrs. Squeers she keeps them in order. There'll be some lost time to make up, of course — there'll be an arrear of flogging as 'll have to be gone through; still, a couple of days makes that all right, and one don't mind a little extra work for one hundred pound. It's pretty nigh the time to wait upon the old woman. From what she said last night, I suspect that if I'm to succeed at all, I shall succeed to-night; so I'll have half a glass more, to wish myself success, and put myself in spirits. Mrs. Squeers, my dear, your health!"

Leering with his one eye as if the lady to whom he drank, had been actually present, Mr. Squeers — in his enthusiasm, no doubt — poured out a full glass, and emptied it; and as the liquor was raw spirits, and he had applied himself to the same bottle more than once already, it is not surprising that he found himself, by this time, in an extremely cheerful state, and quite enough excited for his purpose.

What this purpose was, soon appeared; for, after a few turns about the room to steady himself, he took the bottle under his arm and the glass in his hand, and blowing out the candle as if he purposed being gone some time, stole out upon the staircase and creeping softly to a door opposite his own, tapped gently at it.

"But what's the use of tapping?" he said, "she'll never hear. I suppose she isn't doing anything very particular; and if she is, it don't much matter, that I see."

With this brief preface, Mr. Squeers applied his hand to the latch of the door, and thrusting his head into a garret far more deplorable than that he had just left, and

seeing that there was nobody there, but an old woman, who was bending over a wretched fire (for although the weather was still warm, the evening was chilly), walked in, and tapped her on the shoulder.

"Well, my Slider," said Mr. Squeers, jocularly.

"Is that you?" inquired Peg.

"Ah! it's me, and me's the first person singular, nominative case, agreeing with the verb 'it's,' and governed by Squeers understood, as a acorn, a hour; but when the h is sounded, the a only is to be used, as a 'and, a 'art, a 'ighway," replied Mr. Squeers, quoting at random from the grammar. "At least, if it isn't, you don't know any better, and if it is, I've done it accidentally."

Delivering this reply in his accustomed tone of voice, in which of course it was inaudible to Peg, Mr. Squeers drew a stool to the fire, and placing himself over against her, and the bottle and glass on the floor between them, roared out again, very loud, —

"Well, my Slider!"

"I hear you," said Peg, receiving him very graciously.

"I've come according to promise," roared Squeers.

"So they used to say in that part of the country I come from," observed Peg, complacently, "but I think oil's better."

"Better than what?" roared Squeers, adding some rather strong language in an undertone.

"No," said Peg, "of course not."

"I never saw such a monster as you are!" muttered Squeers, looking as amiable as he possibly could, the while; for Peg's eye was upon him, and she was chuckling fearfully, as though in delight at having made a choice repartee. "Do you see this? this is a bottle."

"I see it," answered Peg.

"Well, and do you see *this?*" bawled Squeers. "This is a glass!" Peg saw that too.

"See here, then," said Squeers, accompanying his remarks with appropriate action, "I fill the glass from the bottle, and I say 'your health, Slider,' and empty it; then I rinse it genteelly with a little drop, which I am forced to throw into the fire — Hallo! we shall have the chimbley alight next — fill it again, and hand it over to you."

"*Your* health," said Peg.

"She understands that, anyways," muttered Squeers, watching Mrs. Sliderskew as she despatched her portion, and choked and gasped in a most awful manner after so doing; "now then, let's have a talk. How's the rheumatics?"

Mrs. Sliderskew, with much blinking and chuckling, and with looks expressive of her strong admiration of Mr. Squeers, his person, manners, and conversation, replied that the rheumatics were better.

"What's the reason," said Mr. Squeers, deriving fresh facetiousness from the bottle; "what's the reason of rheumatics? What do they mean? What do people have 'em for — eh?"

Mrs. Sliderskew didn't know, but suggested that it was possibly because they couldn't help it.

"Measles, rheumatics, hooping-cough, fevers, agers, and lumbagers," said Mr. Squeers, "is all philosophy together; that's what it is. The heavenly bodies is philosophy, and the earthly bodies is philosophy. If there's a screw loose in a heavenly body, that's philosophy; and if there's a screw loose in a earthly body that's philosophy too; or it may be that sometimes there's a little metaphysics in it, but that's not often. Philosophy's the

chap for me. If a parent asks a question in the classical, commercial, or mathematical line, says I, gravely, 'Why, sir, in the first place, are you a philosopher?' — 'No, Mr. Squeers,' he says, 'I a'n't.' 'Then, sir,' says I, 'I am sorry for you, for I shan't be able to explain it.' Naturally, the parent goes away and wishes he was a philosopher, and, equally naturally, thinks I'm one."

Saying this, and a great deal more, with tipsy profundity and a serio-comic air, and keeping his eye all the time on Mrs. Sliderskew, who was unable to hear one word, Mr. Squeers concluded by helping himself and passing the bottle: to which Peg did becoming reverence.

"That's the time of day!" said Mr. Squeers. "You look twenty pound ten, better than you did."

Again Mrs. Sliderskew chuckled, but modesty forbade her assenting verbally to the compliment.

"Twenty pound ten better," repeated Mr. Squeers, "than you did that day when I first introduced myself— don't you know?"

"Ah!" said Peg, shaking her head, "but you frightened me that day."

"Did I?" said Squeers; "well, it was rather a startling thing for a stranger to come and recommend himself by saying that he knew all about you, and what your name was, and why you were living so quiet here, and what you had boned, and who you boned it from, wasn't it?"

Peg nodded her head in strong assent.

"But I know everything that happens in that way, you see," continued Squeers. "Nothing takes place, of that kind, that I a'n't up to entirely. I'm a sort of a lawyer, Slider, of first-rate standing, and understanding

too; I'm the intimate friend and confidential adwiser of pretty nigh every man, woman, and child that gets themselves into difficulties by being too nimble with their fingers, I'm " ——

Mr. Squeers's catalogue of his own merits and accomplishments, which was partly the result of a concerted plan between himself and Ralph Nickleby, and flowed, in part, from the black bottle, was here interrupted by Mrs. Sliderskew.

"Ha, ha, ha!" she cried, folding her arms and wagging her head; "and so he wasn't married after all, wasn't he — not married after all?"

"No," replied Squeers, "that he wasn't!"

"And a young lover come and carried off the bride, eh?" said Peg.

"From under his very nose," replied Squeers; "and I'm told the young chap cut up rough besides, and broke the winders, and forced him to swaller his wedding-favor which nearly choked him."

"Tell me all about it again," cried Peg, with a malicious relish of her old master's defeat, which made her natural hideousness something quite fearful; "let's hear it all again, beginning at the beginning now, as if you'd never told me. Let's have it every word — now — now — beginning at the very first, you know, when he went to the house that morning!"

Mr. Squeers, plying Mrs. Sliderskew freely with the liquor, and sustaining himself under the exertion of speaking so loud by frequent applications to it himself, complied with this request by describing the discomfiture of Arthur Gride, with such improvements on the truth as happened to occur to him, and the ingenious invention and application of which had been very instrumental in

recommending him to her notice in the beginning of their acquaintance. Mrs. Sliderskew was in an ecstasy of delight, rolling her head about, drawing up her skinny shoulders, and wrinkling her cadaverous face into so many and such complicated forms of ugliness, as awakened the unbounded astonishment and disgust even of Mr. Squeers.

"He's a treacherous old goat," said Peg, "and cozened me with cunning tricks and lying promises, but never mind — I'm even with him — I'm even with him."

"More than even, Slider," returned Squeers; "you'd have been even with him, if he'd got married; but with the disappointment besides, you're a long way ahead — out of sight, Slider, quite out of sight. And that reminds me," he added, handing her the glass, "if you want me to give you my opinion of them deeds, and tell you what you'd better keep and what you'd better burn, why, now's your time, Slider."

"There a'n't no hurry for that," said Peg, with several knowing looks and winks.

"Oh! very well!" observed Squeers, "it don't matter to me; you asked me, you know. I shouldn't charge you nothing, being a friend. You're the best judge of course, but you're a bold woman, Slider — that's all."

"How do you mean, bold?" said Peg.

"Why, I only mean that if it was me, I wouldn't keep papers as might hang me, littering about when they might be turned into money — them as wasn't useful made away with, and them as was, laid by somewheres, safe; that's all," returned Squeers; "but everybody's the best judge of their own affairs. All I say is, Slider, *I* wouldn't do it."

"Come," said Peg, "then you shall see 'em."

"I don't want to see 'em," replied Squeers, affecting to be out of humor, "don't talk as if it was a treat. Show 'em to somebody else, and take their advice."

Mr. Squeers would, very likely, have carried on the farce of being offended, a little longer, if Mrs. Sliderskew, in her anxiety to restore herself to her former high position in his good graces, had not become so extremely affectionate that he stood at some risk of being smothered by her caresses. Repressing, with as good a grace as possible, these little familiarities — for which, there is reason to believe, the black bottle was at least as much to blame as any constitutional infirmity on the part of Mrs. Sliderskew — he protested that he had only been joking: and, in proof of his unimpaired good-humor, that he was ready to examine the deeds at once, if, by so doing, he could afford any satisfaction or relief of mind to his fair friend.

"And now you're up, my Slider," bawled Squeers, as she rose to fetch them, "bolt the door."

Peg trotted to the door, and after fumbling at the bolt, crept to the other end of the room, and from beneath the coals which filled the bottom of the cupboard, drew forth a small deal box. Having placed this, on the floor at Squeers's feet, she brought, from under the pillow of her bed, a small key, with which she signed to that gentleman to open it. Mr. Squeers, who had eagerly followed her every motion, lost no time in obeying this hint: and, throwing back the lid, gazed with rapture on the documents which lay within.

"Now you see," said Peg, kneeling down on the floor beside him, and staying his impatient hand; "what's of no use we'll burn; what we can get any money by, we'll keep; and if there's any we could get him into trouble

by, and fret and waste away his heart to shreds, those we'll take particular care of; for that's what I want to do, and what I hoped to do when I left him."

"I thought," said Squeers, "that you didn't bear him any particular good-will. But, I say, why didn't you take some money besides?"

"Some what?" asked Peg.

"Some money," roared Squeers. "I do believe the woman hears me, and wants to make me break a wessel, so that she may have the pleasure of nursing me. Some money, Slider — money!"

"Why, what a man you are to ask!" cried Peg, with some contempt. "If I had taken money from Arthur Gride, he'd have scoured the whole earth to find me — aye, and he'd have smelt it out, and raked it up, somehow, if I had buried it at the bottom of the deepest well in England. No, no! I knew better than that. I took what I thought his secrets were hid in: and them he couldn't afford to make public, let 'em be worth ever so much money. He's an old dog; a sly, old, cunning, thankless dog! He first starved, and then tricked me; and if I could, I'd kill him."

"All right, and very laudable," said Squeers. "But, first and foremost, Slider, burn the box. You should never keep things as may lead to discovery — always mind that. So while you pull it to pieces (which you can easily do, for it's very old and rickety) and burn it in little bits, I'll look over the papers and tell you what they are."

Peg, expressing her acquiescence in this arrangement, Mr. Squeers turned the box bottom upwards, and tumbling the contents upon the floor, handed it to her; the destruction of the box being an extemporary device for

engaging her attention, in case it should prove desirable to distract it from his own proceedings.

"There!" said Squeers; "you poke the pieces between the bars, and make up a good fire, and I'll read the while — let me see — let me see." And taking the candle down beside him, Mr. Squeers, with great eagerness and a cunning grin overspreading his face, entered upon his task of examination.

If the old woman had not been very deaf, she must have heard, when she last went to the door, the breathing of two persons close behind it: and if those two persons had been unacquainted with her infirmity they must probably have chosen that moment either for presenting themselves or taking to flight. But, knowing with whom they had to deal, they remained quite still, and now, not only appeared unobserved at the door — which was not bolted, for the bolt had no hasp — but warily, and with noiseless footsteps, advanced into the room.

As they stole farther and farther in by slight and scarcely perceptible degrees, and with such caution that they scarcely seemed to breathe, the old hag and Squeers little dreaming of any such invasion, and utterly unconscious of there being any soul near, but themselves, were busily occupied with their tasks. The old woman, with her wrinkled face close to the bars of the stove, puffing at the dull embers which had not yet caught the wood — Squeers stooping down to the candle, which brought out the full ugliness of his face, as the light of the fire did that of his companion — both intently engaged, and wearing faces of exultation which contrasted strongly with the anxious looks of those behind, who took advantage of the slightest sound to cover their advance, and, almost before they had moved an inch, and all was silent,

stopped again — this, with the large bare room, damp walls, and flickering doubtful light, combined to form a scene which the most careless and indifferent spectator (could any have been present) could scarcely have failed to derive some interest from, and would not readily have forgotten.

Of the stealthy comers, Frank Cheeryble was one, and Newman Noggs the other. Newman had caught up, by the rusty nozzle, an old pair of bellows, which were just undergoing a flourish in the air preparatory to a descent upon the head of Mr. Squeers, when Frank, with an earnest gesture, stayed his arm, and, taking another step in advance, came so close behind the schoolmaster that, by leaning slightly forward, he could plainly distinguish the writing which he held up to his eye.

Mr. Squeers, not being remarkably erudite, appeared to be considerably puzzled by this first prize, which was in an engrossing hand, and not very legible except to a practised eye. Having tried it by reading from left to right, and from right to left, and finding it equally clear both ways, he turned it upside down with no better success.

"Ha, ha, ha!" chuckled Peg, who, on her knees before the fire, was feeding it with fragments of the box, and grinning in most devilish exultation. "What's that writing about, eh?"

"Nothing particular," replied Squeers, tossing it towards her. "It's only an old lease, as well as I can make out. Throw it in the fire."

Mrs. Sliderskew complied, and inquired what the next one was.

"This," said Squeers, "is a bundle of overdue acceptances and renewed bills of six or eight young gentle-

men, but they're all M. P.'s, so it's of no use to anybody. Throw it in the fire!"

Peg did as she was bidden, and waited for the next.

"This," said Squeers, "seems to be some deed of sale of the right of presentation to the rectory of Purechurch, in the valley of Cashup. Take care of that, Slider — literally for God's sake. It'll fetch its price at the Auction Mart."

"What's the next?" inquired Peg.

"Why, this," said Squeers, "seems, from the two letters that's with it, to be a bond from a curate down in the country, to pay half a year's wages of forty pound for borrowing twenty. Take care of that, for if he don't pay it, his bishop will very soon be down upon him. We know what the camel and the needle's eye means — no man as can't live upon his income, whatever it is, must expect to go to heaven at any price — it's very odd; I don't see anything like it yet."

"What's the matter?" said Peg.

"Nothing," replied Squeers, "only I'm looking for"——

Newman raised the bellows again. Once more, Frank, by a rapid motion of his arm, unaccompanied by any noise, checked him in his purpose.

"Here you are," said Squeers, "bonds — take care of them. Warrant of attorney — take care of that. Two cognovits — take care of them. Lease and release — burn that. Ah! 'Madeline Bray — come of age or marry — the said Madeline' — here, burn *that!*"

Eagerly throwing towards the old woman a parchment that he caught up for the purpose, Squeers, as she turned her head, thrust into the breast of his large coat, the deed in which these words had caught his eye, and burst into a shout of triumph.

"I've got it!" said Squeers. "I've got it! Hurra! The plan was a good one though the chance was desperate, and the day's our own at last!"

Peg demanded what he laughed at, but no answer was returned. Newman's arm could no longer be restrained; the bellows, descending heavily and with unerring aim on the very centre of Mr. Squeers's head, felled him to the floor, and stretched him on it flat and senseless.

CHAPTER LVIII.

IN WHICH ONE SCENE OF THIS HISTORY IS CLOSED.

Dividing the distance into two days' journey, in order that his charge might sustain the less exhaustion and fatigue from travelling so far, Nicholas, at the end of the second day from their leaving home, found himself within a very few miles of the spot where the happiest years of his life had been passed, and which, while it filled his mind with pleasant and peaceful thoughts, brought back many painful and vivid recollections of the circumstances in which he and his had wandered forth from their old home, cast upon the rough world and the mercy of strangers.

It needed no such reflections as those which the memory of old days, and wanderings among scenes where our childhood has been passed, usually awaken in the most insensible minds, to soften the heart of Nicholas, and render him more than usually mindful of his drooping friend. By night and day, at all times and seasons: always watchful, attentive, and solicitous, and never varying in the discharge of his self-imposed duty to one so friendless and helpless as he whose sands of life were now fast running out and dwindling rapidly away: he was ever at his side. He never left him. To encourage and animate him, administer to his wants, support and

cheer him to the utmost of his power, was now his constant and unceasing occupation.

They procured a humble lodging in a small farm-house, surrounded by meadows where Nicholas had often revelled when a child with a troop of merry school-fellows; and here they took up their rest.

At first, Smike was strong enough to walk about, for short distances at a time, with no other support or aid than that which Nicholas could afford him. At this time, nothing appeared to interest him so much as visiting those places which had been most familiar to his friend in bygone days. Yielding to this fancy, and pleased to find that its indulgence beguiled the sick boy of many tedious hours, and never failed to afford him matter for thought and conversation afterwards, Nicholas made such spots the scenes of their daily rambles: driving him from place to place in a little pony-chair, and supporting him on his arm while they walked slowly among these old haunts, or lingered in the sunlight to take long parting looks of those which were most quiet and beautiful.

It was on such occasions as these, that Nicholas, yielding almost unconsciously to the interest of old associations, would point out some tree that he had climbed, a hundred times, to peep at the young birds in their nest; and the branch from which he used to shout to little Kate, who stood below terrified at the height he had gained, and yet urging him higher still by the intensity of her admiration. There was the old house too, which they would pass every day, looking up at the tiny window through which the sun used to stream in and wake him on the summer mornings — they were all summer mornings then — and climbing up the garden-wall and

looking over, Nicholas could see the very rose-bush which had come, a present to Kate, from some little lover, and she had planted with her own hands. There were the hedge-rows where the brother and sister had so often gathered wild-flowers together, and the green fields and shady paths where they had so often strayed. There was not a lane, or brook, or copse, or cottage near, with which some childish event was not entwined, and back it came upon the mind — as events of childhood do — nothing in itself: perhaps a word, a laugh, a look, some slight distress, a passing thought or fear: and yet more strongly and distinctly marked, and better remembered, than the hardest trials or severest sorrows of a year ago.

One of these expeditions led them through the churchyard where was his father's grave. "Even here," said Nicholas, softly, "we used to loiter before we knew what death was, and when we little thought whose ashes would rest beneath; and, wondering at the silence, sit down to rest and speak below our breath. Once, Kate was lost, and after an hour of fruitless search, they found her, fast asleep, under that tree which shades my father's grave. He was very fond of her, and said when he took her up in his arms, still sleeping, that whenever he died he would wish to be buried where his dear little child had laid her head. You see his wish was not forgotten."

Nothing more passed, at the time, but that night, as Nicholas sat beside his bed, Smike started from what had seemed to be a slumber, and laying his hand in his, prayed, as the tears coursed down his face, that he would make him one solemn promise.

"What is that?" said Nicholas, kindly. "If I can redeem it, or hope to do so, you know I will."

"I am sure you will," was the reply. "Promise me

that when I die, I shall be buried near — as near as they can make my grave — to the tree we saw to-day."

Nicholas gave the promise; he had few words to give it in, but they were solemn and earnest. His poor friend kept his hand in his, and turned as if to sleep. But there were stifled sobs; and the hand was pressed more than once, or twice, or thrice, before he sunk to rest, and slowly loosed his hold.

In a fortnight's time, he became too ill to move about. Once or twice, Nicholas drove him out, propped up with pillows; but the motion of the chaise was painful to him, and brought on fits of fainting, which, in his weakened state, were dangerous. There was an old couch in the house, which was his favorite resting-place by day; when the sun shone, and the weather was warm, Nicholas had this wheeled into a little orchard which was close at hand, and his charge being well wrapt up and carried out to it, they used to sit there sometimes for hours together.

It was on one of these occasions that a circumstance took place, which Nicholas, at the time, thoroughly believed to be the mere delusion of an imagination affected by disease; but which he had, afterwards, too good reason to know was of real and actual occurrence.

He had brought Smike out in his arms — poor fellow! a child might have carried him then — to see the sunset, and, having arranged his couch, had taken his seat beside it. He had been watching the whole of the night before, and being greatly fatigued both in mind and body, gradually fell asleep.

He could not have closed his eyes five minutes, when he was awakened by a scream, and starting up in that kind of terror which affects a person suddenly roused,

saw, to his great astonishment, that his charge had struggled into a sitting posture, and with eyes almost starting from their sockets, cold dew standing on his forehead, and in a fit of trembling which quite convulsed his frame, was calling to him for help.

"Good Heaven, what is this!" said Nicholas, bending over him. "Be calm; you have been dreaming."

"No, no, no!" cried Smike, clinging to him. "Hold me tight, Don't let me go. There — there — behind the tree!"

Nicholas followed his eyes, which were directed to some distance behind the chair from which he himself had just risen. But, there was nothing there.

"This is nothing but your fancy," he said, as he strove to compose him; "nothing else indeed."

"I know better. I saw as plain as I see now," was the answer. "Oh! say you'll keep me with you — swear you won't leave me, for an instant!"

"Do I ever leave you?" returned Nicholas. "Lie down again — there! You see I'm here. Now, tell me — what was it?"

"Do you remember," said Smike, in a low voice, and glancing fearfully round, "do you remember my telling you of the man who first took me to the school?"

"Yes, surely."

"I raised my eyes, just now, towards that tree — that one with the thick trunk — and there, with his eyes fixed on me, he stood!"

"Only reflect for one moment," said Nicholas; "granting, for an instant, that it's likely he is alive and wandering about a lonely place like this, so far removed from the public road, do you think that at this distance of time you could possibly know that man again?"

"Anywhere — in any dress," returned Smike; "but, just now, he stood leaning upon his stick and looking at me, exactly as I told you I remembered him. He was dusty with walking, and poorly dressed — I think his clothes were ragged — but directly I saw him, the wet night, his face when he left me, the parlor I was left in, and the people that were there, all seemed to come back together. When he knew I saw him, he looked frightened; for he started, and shrunk away. I have thought of him by day, and dreamt of him by night. He looked in my sleep, when I was quite a little child, and has looked in my sleep ever since, as he did just now."

Nicholas endeavored, by every persuasion and argument he could think of, to convince the terrified creature that his imagination had deceived him, and that this close resemblance between the creation of his dreams and the man he supposed he had seen was but a proof of it; but all in vain. When he could persuade him to remain, for a few moments, in the care of the people to whom the house belonged, he instituted a strict inquiry whether any stranger had been seen, and searched himself behind the tree, and through the orchard, and upon the land immediately adjoining, and in every place near, where it was possible for a man to lie concealed; but all in vain. Satisfied that he was right in his original conjecture, he applied himself to calming the fears of Smike, which, after some time, he partially succeeded in doing, though not in removing the impression upon his mind; for he still declared, again and again in the most solemn and fervid manner, that he had positively seen what he had described, and that nothing could ever remove his conviction of its reality.

And now, Nicholas began to see that hope was gone,

and that, upon the partner of his poverty, and the sharer of his better fortune, the world was closing fast. There was little pain, little uneasiness, but there was no rallying, no effort, no struggle for life. He was worn and wasted to the last degree; his voice had sunk so low, that he could scarce be heard to speak. Nature was thoroughly exhausted, and he had lain him down to die.

On a fine, mild autumn day, when all was tranquil and at peace: when the soft sweet air crept in at the open window of the quiet room, and not a sound was heard but the gentle rustling of the leaves: Nicholas sat in his old place by the bedside, and knew that the time was nearly come. So very still it was, that, every now and then, he bent down his ear to listen for the breathing of him who lay asleep, as if to assure himself that life was still there, and that he had not fallen into that deep slumber from which on earth there is no waking.

While he was thus employed, the closed eyes opened, and on the pale face there came a placid smile.

"That's well!" said Nicholas. "The sleep has done you good."

"I have had such pleasant dreams," was the answer. "Such pleasant, happy dreams!"

"Of what?" said Nicholas.

The dying boy turned towards him, and, putting his arm about his neck, made answer, "I shall soon be there!"

After a short silence, he spoke again.

"I am not afraid to die," he said, "I am quite contented. I almost think that if I could rise from this bed quite well, I would not wish to do so, now. You have

so often told me we shall meet again — so very often lately, and now I feel the truth of that, so strongly — that I can even bear to part from you."

The trembling voice and tearful eye, and the closer grasp of the arm which accompanied these latter words, showed how they filled the speaker's heart; nor were there wanting, indications of how deeply they had touched the heart of him to whom they were addressed.

"You say, well," returned Nicholas at length, "and comfort me very much, dear fellow. Let me hear you say you are happy, if you can."

"I must tell you something first. I should not have a secret from you. You would not blame me, at a time like this, I know."

"*I* blame you!" exclaimed Nicholas.

"I am sure you would not. You asked me why I was so changed, and — and sat so much alone. Shall I tell you why?"

"Not if it pains you," said Nicholas. "I only asked that I might make you happier, if I could."

"I know — I felt that, at the time." He drew his friend closer to him. "You will forgive me; I could not help it, but though I would have died to make her happy, it broke my heart to see — I know he loves her dearly — Oh! who could find that out, so soon as I!"

The words which followed were feebly and faintly uttered, and broken by long pauses; but, from them, Nicholas learnt, for the first time, that the dying boy, with all the ardor of a nature concentrated on one absorbing, hopeless, secret passion, loved his sister Kate.

He had procured a lock of her hair, which hung at his breast, folded in one or two slight ribbons she had

worn. He prayed that, when he was dead, Nicholas would take it off, so that no eyes but his might see it, and that when he was laid in his coffin and about to be placed in the earth, he would hang it round his neck again, that it might rest with him in the grave.

Upon his knees Nicholas gave him this pledge, and promised again that he should rest in the spot he had pointed out. They embraced, and kissed each other on the cheek.

"Now," he murmured, "I am happy."

He fell into a light slumber, and waking smiled as before; then, spoke of beautiful gardens, which he said stretched out before him, and were filled with figures of men, women, and many children, all with light upon their faces; then, whispered that it was Eden — and so died.

CHAPTER LIX.

THE PLOTS BEGIN TO FAIL, AND DOUBTS AND DANGERS TO DISTURB THE PLOTTER.

Ralph sat alone, in the solitary room where he was accustomed to take his meals, and to sit of nights when no profitable occupation called him abroad. Before him was an untasted breakfast, and near to where his fingers beat restlessly upon the table, lay his watch. It was long past the time at which, for many years, he had put it in his pocket and gone with measured steps down-stairs to the business of the day, but he took as little heed of its monotonous warning, as of the meat and drink before him, and remained with his head resting on one hand, and his eyes fixed moodily on the ground.

This departure from his regular and constant habit, in one so regular and unvarying in all that appertained to the daily pursuit of riches, would almost of itself have told that the usurer was not well. That he labored under some mental or bodily indisposition, and that it was one of no slight kind so to affect a man like him, was sufficiently shown by his haggard face, jaded air, and hollow, languid eyes: which he raised at last with a start and a hasty glance around him, as one who suddenly awakes from sleep, and cannot immediately recognize the place in which he finds himself.

"What is this," he said, "that hangs over me, and I cannot shake off? I have never pampered myself, and should not be ill. I have never moped, and pined, and yielded to fancies; but what *can* a man do, without rest?"

He pressed his hand upon his forehead.

"Night after night comes and goes, and I have no rest. If I sleep, what rest is that which is disturbed by constant dreams of the same detested faces crowding round me — of the same detested people, in every variety of action, mingling with all I say and do, and always to my defeat? Waking, what rest have I, constantly haunted by this heavy shadow of — I know not what — which is its worst character! I must have rest. One night's unbroken rest, and I should be a man again."

Pushing the table from him while he spoke, as though he loathed the sight of food, he encountered the watch: the hands of which were almost upon noon.

"This is strange!" he said, "noon, and Noggs not here! what drunken brawl keeps him away? I would give something now — something in money even after that dreadful loss — if he had stabbed a man in a tavern scuffle, or broken into a house, or picked a pocket, or done anything that would send him abroad with an iron ring upon his leg, and rid me of him. Better still, if I could throw temptation in his way, and lure him on to rob me. He should be welcome to what he took, so I brought the law upon him; for he is a traitor, I swear! How, or when, or where I don't know, though I suspect."

After waiting for another half-hour, he despatched the woman who kept his house to Newman's lodging, to in-

quire if he were ill, and why he had not come or sent. She brought back answer that he had not been home all night, and that no one could tell her anything about him.

"But there is a gentleman, sir," she said, "below, who was standing at the door when I came in, and he says" ——

"What says he?" demanded Ralph, turning angrily upon her. "I told you I would see nobody."

"He says," replied the woman, abashed by his harshness, "that he comes on very particular business which admits of no excuse; and I thought perhaps it might be about" —

"About what, in the devil's name?" said Ralph. "*You* spy and speculate on people's business with me, do you?"

"Dear, no, sir! I saw you were anxious, and thought it might be about Mr. Noggs; that's all."

"Saw I was anxious!" muttered Ralph; "they all watch me, now. Where is this person? You did not say I was not down yet, I hope?"

The woman replied that he was in the little office, and that she had said her master was engaged, but she would take the message.

"Well," said Ralph, "I'll see him. Go you to your kitchen, and keep there, — do you mind me?"

Glad to be released, the woman quickly disappeared. Collecting himself, and assuming as much of his accustomed manner as his utmost resolution could summon, Ralph descended the stairs. After pausing for a few moments, with his hand upon the lock, he entered Newman's room, and confronted Mr. Charles Cheeryble.

Of all men alive, this was one of the last he would

have wished to meet at any time; but, now, that he recognized in him only the patron and protector of Nicholas, he would rather have seen a spectre. One beneficial effect, however, the encounter had upon him. It instantly roused all his dormant energies; rekindled in his breast the passions that, for many years, had found an improving home there; called up all his wrath, hatred, and malice; restored the sneer to his lip, and the scowl to his brow; and made him again, in all outward appearance, the same Ralph Nickleby whom so many had bitter cause to remember.

"Humph!" said Ralph, pausing at the door. "This is an unexpected favor, sir."

"And an unwelcome one," said brother Charles; "an unwelcome one, I know."

"Men say you are truth itself, sir," replied Ralph. "You speak truth now, at all events, and I'll not contradict you. The favor is, at least, as unwelcome as it is unexpected. I can scarcely say more!"

"Plainly, sir" —— began brother Charles.

"Plainly, sir," interrupted Ralph, "I wish this conference to be a short one, and to end where it begins. I guess the subject upon which you are about to speak, and I'll not hear you. You like plainness, I believe, — there it is. Here is the door as you see. Our way lies in very different directions. Take yours, I beg of you, and leave me to pursue mine in quiet."

"In quiet!" repeated brother Charles mildly, and looking at him with more of pity than reproach. "To pursue *his* way in quiet!"

"You will scarcely remain in my house, I presume, sir, against my will," said Ralph; "or you can scarcely hope to make an impression upon a man who closes

his ears to all that you can say, and is firmly and resolutely determined not to hear you."

"Mr. Nickleby, sir," returned brother Charles: no less mildly than before, but firmly too, "I come here against my will — sorely and grievously against my will. I have never been in this house before; and, to speak my mind, sir, I don't feel at home or easy in it, and have no wish ever to be here again. You do not guess the subject on which I come to speak to you; you do not indeed. I am sure of that, or your manner would be a very different one."

Ralph glanced keenly at him, but the clear eye and open countenance of the honest old merchant underwent no change of expression, and met his look without reserve.

"Shall I go on?" said Mr. Cheeryble.

"Oh, by all means, if you please," returned Ralph, dryly. "Here are walls to speak to, sir, a desk, and two stools — most attentive auditors, and certain not to interrupt you. Go on, I beg; make my house yours, and perhaps by the time I return from my walk, you will have finished what you have to say, and will yield me up possession again."

So saying, he buttoned his coat, and turning into the passage, took down his hat. The old gentleman followed, and was about to speak, when Ralph waved him off impatiently, and said:

"Not a word. I tell you, sir, not a word. Virtuous as you are, you are not an angel yet, to appear in men's houses whether they will or no, and pour your speech into unwilling ears. Preach to the walls I tell you — not to me!"

"I am no angel, Heaven knows," returned brother

Charles, shaking his head, "but an erring and imperfect man; nevertheless, there is one quality which all men have, in common with the angels, blessed opportunities of exercising, if they will — mercy. It is an errand of mercy that brings me here. Pray, let me discharge it."

"I show no mercy," retorted Ralph with a triumphant smile, "and I ask none. Seek no mercy from me, sir, in behalf of the fellow who has imposed upon your childish credulity, but let him expect the worst that I can do."

"*He* ask mercy at your hands!" exclaimed the old merchant warmly, "ask it at his, sir; ask it at his. If you will not hear me, now, when you may, hear me when you must, or anticipate what I would say, and take measures to prevent our ever meeting again. Your nephew is a noble lad, sir, an honest, noble lad. What you are, Mr. Nickleby, I will not say; but what you have done, I know. Now, sir, when you go about the business in which you have been recently engaged, and find it difficult of pursuing, come to me and my brother Ned, and Tim Linkinwater, sir, and we'll explain it for you — and come soon, or it may be too late, and you may have it explained with a little more roughness, and a little less delicacy — and never forget, sir, that I came here this morning, in mercy to you, and am still ready to talk to you in the same spirit."

With these words, uttered with great emphasis and emotion, brother Charles put on his broad-brimmed hat, and, passing Ralph Nickleby without any other remark, trotted nimbly into the street. Ralph looked after him, but neither moved nor spoke for some time: when he broke what almost seemed the silence of stupefaction, by a scornful laugh.

"This," he said, "from its wildness, should be another of those dreams that have so broken my rest of late. In mercy to me! — Pho! The old simpleton has gone mad."

Although he expressed himself in this derisive and contemptuous manner, it was plain that, the more Ralph pondered, the more ill at ease he became, and the more he labored under some vague anxiety and alarm, which increased as the time passed on and no tidings of Newman Noggs arrived. After waiting until late in the afternoon, tortured by various apprehensions and misgivings, and the recollection of the warning which his nephew had given him when they last met: the further confirmation of which now presented itself in one shape of probability, now in another, and haunted him perpetually: he left home, and, scarcely knowing why, save that he was in a suspicious and agitated mood, betook himself to Snawley's house. His wife presented herself: and, of her, Ralph inquired whether her husband was at home.

"No," she said sharply, "he is not indeed, and I don't think he will be at home for a very long time; that's more."

"Do you know who I am?" asked Ralph.

"Oh yes, I know you very well — too well, perhaps, and perhaps he does too, and sorry am I that I should have to say it."

"Tell him that I saw him through the window-blind above, as I crossed the road just now, and that I would speak to him on business," said Ralph. "Do you hear?"

"I hear," rejoined Mrs. Snawley, taking no further notice of the request.

"I knew this woman was a hypocrite, in the way of psalms and Scripture phrases," said Ralph, passing quietly by, "but I never knew she drank before."

"Stop! You don't come in here," said Mr. Snawley's better-half, interposing her person, which was a robust one, in the door-way. "You have said more than enough to him on business, before now. I always told him what dealing with you and working out your schemes would come to. It was either you or the school-master — one of you, or the two between you — that got the forged letter done; remember that! That wasn't his doing, so don't lay it at his door."

"Hold your tongue, you Jezebel," said Ralph, looking fearfully round.

"Ah, I know when to hold my tongue, and when to speak, Mr. Nickleby," retorted the dame. "Take care that other people know when to hold theirs."

"You jade," said Ralph, "if your husband has been idiot enough to trust you with his secrets, keep them — keep them, she-devil that you are!"

"Not so much his secrets as other people's secrets perhaps," retorted the woman; "not so much his secrets as yours. None of your black looks at me! You'll want 'em all perhaps for another time. You had better keep 'em."

"Will you," said Ralph, suppressing his passion as well as he could, and clutching her tightly by the wrist; "will you go to your husband and tell him that I know he is at home, and that I must see him? And will you tell me what it is, that you and he mean, by this new style of behavior?"

"No," replied the woman, violently disengaging herself, "I'll do neither."

"You set me at defiance, do you?" said Ralph.

"Yes," was the answer. "I do."

For an instant Ralph had his hand raised, as though he were about to strike her; but, checking himself, and nodding his head and muttering as though to assure her he would not forget this, walked away.

Thence, he went straight to the inn which Mr. Squeers frequented, and inquired when he had been there last; in the vague hope that, successful or unsuccessful, he might, by this time, have returned from his mission and be able to assure him that all was safe. But Mr. Squeers had not been there, for ten days, and all that the people could tell about him was, that he had left his luggage and his bill.

Disturbed by a thousand fears and surmises, and bent upon ascertaining whether Squeers had any suspicion of Snawley, or was, in any way, a party to this altered behavior, Ralph determined to hazard the extreme step of inquiring for him at the Lambeth lodging, and having an interview with him even there. Bent upon this purpose, and in that mood in which delay is insupportable, he repaired at once to the place; and being, by description, perfectly acquainted with the situation of his room, crept up-stairs and knocked gently at the door.

Not one, nor two, nor three, nor yet a dozen knocks, served to convince Ralph, against his wish, that there was nobody inside. He reasoned that he might be asleep; and, listening, almost persuaded himself that he could hear him breathe. Even when he was satisfied that he could not be there, he sat patiently on a broken stair and waited; arguing that he had gone out upon some slight errand, and must soon return.

Many feet came up the creaking stairs; and the step

of some seemed to his listening ear so like that of the man for whom he waited, that Ralph often stood up to be ready to address him when he reached the top; but, one by one, each person turned off into some room short of the place where he was stationed: and at every such disappointment he felt quite chilled and lonely.

At length he felt it was hopeless to remain, and going down-stairs again, inquired of one of the lodgers if he knew anything of Mr. Squeers's movements — mentioning that worthy by an assumed name which had been agreed upon between them. By this lodger he was referred to another, and by him to some one else, from whom he learnt, that, late on the previous night, he had gone out hastily with two men, who had shortly afterwards returned for the old woman who lived on the same floor; and that, although the circumstance had attracted the attention of the informant, he had not spoken to them at the time, nor made any inquiry afterwards.

This possessed him with the idea that, perhaps, Peg Sliderskew had been apprehended for the robbery, and that Mr. Squeers, being with her at the time, had been apprehended also, on suspicion of being a confederate. If this were so, the fact must be known to Gride; and to Gride's house he directed his steps: now thoroughly alarmed, and fearful that there were indeed plots afoot, tending to his discomfiture and ruin.

Arrived at the usurer's house, he found the windows close shut, the dingy blinds drawn down: all silent, melancholy, and deserted. But this was its usual aspect. He knocked — gently at first — then loud and vigorously — but nobody came. He wrote a few words in pencil on a card, and having thrust it under the door was going away, when a noise above, as though a win-

dow-sash were stealthily raised, caught his ear, and looking up he could just discern the face of Gride himself, cautiously peering over the house parapet from the window of the garret. Seeing who was below, he drew it in again; not so quickly, however, but that Ralph let him know he was observed, and called to him to come down.

The call being repeated, Gride looked out again, so cautiously that no part of the old man's body was visible. The sharp features and white hair appearing alone, above the parapet, looked like a severed head garnishing the wall.

"Hush!" he cried. "Go away — go away!"

"Come down," said Ralph, beckoning him.

"Go a—way!" squeaked Gride, shaking his head in a sort of ecstasy of impatience. "Don't speak to me, don't knock, don't call attention to the house, but go away."

"I'll knock, I swear, till I have your neighbors up in arms," said Ralph, "if you don't tell me what you mean by lurking there, you whining cur."

"I can't hear what you say — don't talk to me — it isn't safe — go away — go away!" returned Gride.

"Come down, I say. Will you come down!" said Ralph fiercely.

"No—o—o—o," snarled Gride. He drew in his head; and Ralph, left standing in the street, could hear the sash closed, as gently and carefully as it had been opened.

"How is this," said he, "that they all fall from me, and shun me like the plague — these men who have licked the dust from my feet! *Is* my day past, and is this indeed the coming on of night? I'll know what it

means! I will, at any cost. I am firmer and more myself, just now, than I have been these many days."

Turning from the door, which, in the first transport of his rage, he had meditated battering upon, until Gride's very fears should impel him to open it, he turned his face towards the city, and working his way steadily through the crowd which was pouring from it (it was by this time between five and six o'clock in the afternoon) went straight to the house of business of the Brothers Cheeryble, and putting his head into the glass case, found Tim Linkinwater alone.

"My name's Nickleby," said Ralph.

"I know it," replied Tim, surveying him through his spectacles.

"Which of your firm was it who called on me this morning?" demanded Ralph.

"Mr. Charles."

"Then, tell Mr. Charles I want to see him."

"You shall see," said Tim, getting off his stool with great agility, "You shall see, not only Mr. Charles, but Mr. Ned likewise."

Tim stopped, looked steadily and severely at Ralph, nodded his head once, in a curt manner which seemed to say there was a little more behind, and vanished. After a short interval, he returned, and, ushering Ralph into the presence of the two brothers, remained in the room himself.

"I want to speak to you, who spoke to me this morning," said Ralph, pointing out with his finger the man whom he addressed.

"I have no secrets from my brother Ned, or from Tim Linkinwater," observed brother Charles quietly.

"I have," said Ralph.

"Mr. Nickleby, sir," said brother Ned, "the matter upon which my brother Charles called upon you this morning, is one which is already perfectly well known to us three, and to others besides, and must unhappily soon become known to a great many more. He waited upon you, sir, this morning, alone, as a matter of delicacy and consideration. We feel, now, that further delicacy and consideration would be misplaced; and, if we confer together, it must be as we are or not at all."

"Well, gentlemen," said Ralph with a curl of the lip, "talking in riddles would seem to be the peculiar forte of you two, and I suppose your clerk, like a prudent man, has studied the art also with a view to your good graces. Talk in company, gentlemen, in God's name. I'll humor you."

"Humor!" cried Tim Linkinwater, suddenly growing very red in the face, "He'll humor us! He'll humor Cheeryble Brothers! Do you hear that? Do you hear him? *Do* you hear him say he'll humor Cheeryble Brothers?"

"Tim," said Charles and Ned together, "pray Tim — pray now, don't."

Tim, taking the hint, stifled his indignation as well as he could, and suffered it to escape through his spectacles, with the additional safety-valve of a short hysterical laugh now and then, which seemed to relieve him mightily.

"As nobody bids me to a seat," said Ralph, looking round, "I'll take one, for I am fatigued with walking. And now, if you please, gentlemen, I wish to know — I demand to know; I have the right — what you have to say to me, which justifies such a tone as you have assumed, and that underhand interference in my affairs

which, I have reason to suppose, you have been practising. I tell you plainly, gentlemen, that little as I care for the opinion of the world (as the slang goes), I don't choose to submit quietly to slander and malice. Whether you suffer yourselves to be imposed upon, too easily, or wilfully make yourselves parties to it, the result to me is the same. In either case, you can't expect from a plain man like myself much consideration or forbearance."

So coolly and deliberately was this said, that nine men out of ten, ignorant of the circumstances, would have supposed Ralph to be really an injured man. There he sat, with folded arms; paler than usual, certainly, and sufficiently ill-favored, but quite collected — far more so, than the brothers or the exasperated Tim — and ready to face out the worst.

"Very well, sir," said brother Charles. "Very well. Brother Ned, will you ring the bell?"

"Charles, my dear fellow! stop one instant," returned the other. "It will be better for Mr. Nickleby and for our object that he should remain silent if he can, till we have said what we have to say. I wish him to understand that."

"Quite right, quite right," said brother Charles.

Ralph smiled, but made no reply. The bell was rung; the room-door opened; a man came in, with a halting walk; and, looking round, Ralph's eyes met those of Newman Noggs. From that moment, his heart began to fail him.

"This is a good beginning," he said bitterly. "Oh! this is a good beginning. You are candid, honest, open-hearted, fair-dealing men! I always knew the real worth of such characters as yours! To tamper with a fellow like this, who would sell his soul (if he had one)

for drink, and whose every word is a lie, — what men are safe if this is done? Oh it's a good beginning!"

"I *will* speak," cried Newman, standing on tiptoe to look over Tim's head, who had interposed to prevent him. "Hallo, you sir — old Nickleby! — what do you mean when you talk of 'a fellow like this?' Who made me 'a fellow like this?' If I would sell my soul for drink, why wasn't I a thief, swindler, house-breaker, area sneak, robber of pence out of the trays of blind men's dogs, rather than your drudge and pack-horse? If my every word was a lie, why wasn't I a pet and favorite of yours? Lie! When did I ever cringe and fawn to you — eh? Tell me that! I served you faithfully. I did more work, because I was poor, and took more hard words from you because I despised you and them, than any man you could have got from the parish workhouse. I did. I served you because I was proud; because I was a lonely man with you, and there were no other drudges to see my degradation; and because nobody knew, better than you, that I was a ruined man: that I hadn't always been what I am: and that I might have been better off, if I hadn't been a fool and fallen into the hands of you and others who were knaves. Do you deny that — eh?"

"Gently," reasoned Tim, "you said you wouldn't."

"I said I wouldn't!" cried Newman, thrusting him aside, and moving his hand as Tim moved, so as to keep him at arm's-length, "don't tell me! Here, you Nickleby! don't pretend not to mind me; it won't do; I know better. You were talking of tampering, just now. Who tampered with Yorkshire school-masters, and, while they sent the drudge out, that he shouldn't overhear, forgot that such great caution might render him suspicious,

and that he might watch his master out at nights, and might set other eyes to watch the school-master? Who tampered with a selfish father, urging him to sell his daughter to old Arthur Gride, and tampered with Gride too, and did so in the little office, *with a closet in the room?*"

Ralph had put a great command upon himself; but he could not have suppressed a slight start, if he had been certain to be beheaded for it next moment.

"Aha!" cried Newman, "you mind me now, do you? What first set this fag to be jealous of his master's actions, and to feel that, if he hadn't crossed him when he might, he would have been as bad as he, or worse? That master's cruel treatment of his own flesh and blood, and vile designs upon a young girl who interested even his broken-down, drunken, miserable hack, and made him linger in his service, in the hope of doing her some good (as, thank God, he had done others once or twice before), when he would, otherwise, have relieved his feelings by pommelling his master soundly, and then going to the Devil. He would — mark that; and mark this — that I'm here now, because these gentlemen thought it best. When I sought them out (as I did — there was no tampering with me); I told them I wanted help to find you out, to trace you down, to go through with what I had begun, to help the right; and that when I had done it, I'd burst into your room and tell you all, face to face, man to man, and like a man. Now I've said my say, and let anybody else say theirs, and fire away!"

With this concluding sentiment, Newman Noggs, who had been perpetually sitting down and getting up again all through his speech, which he had delivered in a

series of jerks; and who was, from the violent exercise and the excitement combined, in a state of most intense and fiery heat: became, without passing through any intermediate stage, stiff, upright, and motionless, and so remained, staring at Ralph Nickleby with all his might and main.

Ralph looked at him, for an instant, and for an instant only; then, waved his hand, and beating the ground with his foot, said in a choking voice,

"Go on, gentlemen, go on! I'm patient, you see. There's law to be had, there's law. I shall call you to an account for this. Take care what you say; I shall make you prove it."

"The proof is ready," returned brother Charles, "quite ready to our hands. The man Snawley, last night, made a confession."

"Who may 'the man Snawley' be," returned Ralph, "and what may his 'confession' have to do with my affairs?"

To this inquiry, put with a dogged inflexibility of manner, the old gentleman returned no answer, but went on to say, that to show him how much they were in earnest, it would be necessary to tell him, not only what accusations were made against him, but what proof of them they had, and how that proof had been acquired. This laying open of the whole question, brought up brother Ned, Tim Linkinwater, and Newman Noggs, all three at once, who, after a vast deal of talking together, and a scene of great confusion, laid before Ralph, in distinct terms, the following statement.

That, Newman, having been solemnly assured by one not then producible that Smike was not the son of Snawley, and this person having offered to make oath to that

effect, if necessary, they had by this communication been first led to doubt the claim set up, which they would otherwise have seen no reason to dispute ; supported as it was by evidence which they had no power of disproving. That, once suspecting the existence of a conspiracy, they had no difficulty in tracing back its origin to the malice of Ralph, and the vindictiveness and avarice of Squeers. That, suspicion and proof being two very different things, they had been advised by a lawyer, eminent for his sagacity and acuteness in such practice, to resist the proceedings taken on the other side for the recovery of the youth, as slowly and artfully as possible, and meanwhile to beset Snawley (with whom it was clear the main falsehood must rest) ; to lead him, if possible, into contradictory and conflicting statements ; to harass him by all available means ; and so to practise on his fears, and regard for his own safety, as to induce him to divulge the whole scheme, and to give up his employer and whomsoever else he could implicate. That, all this had been skilfully done ; but that Snawley, who was well practised in the arts of low cunning and intrigue, had successfully baffled all their attempts, until an unexpected circumstance had brought him, last night, upon his knees.

It thus arose. When Newman Noggs reported that Squeers was again in town, and that an interview of such secrecy had taken place between him and Ralph that he had been sent out of the house, plainly lest he should overhear a word, a watch was set upon the schoolmaster, in the hope that something might be discovered which would throw some light upon the suspected plot. It being found, however, that he held no further communication with Ralph, nor any with Snawley, and lived

quite alone, they were completely at fault; the watch was withdrawn, and they would have observed his motions no longer, if it had not happened that, one night, Newman stumbled unobserved on him and Ralph in the street together. Following them, he discovered, to his surprise, that they repaired to various low lodging-houses, and taverns kept by broken gamblers, to more than one of whom Ralph was known, and that they were in pursuit — so he found by inquiries when they had left — of an old woman, whose description exactly tallied with that of deaf Mrs. Sliderskew. Affairs now appearing to assume a more serious complexion, the watch was renewed with increased vigilance; an officer was procured, who took up his abode in the same tavern with Squeers; and by him and Frank Cheeryble, the footsteps of the unconscious school-master were dogged, until he was safely housed in the lodging at Lambeth. Mr. Squeers having shifted his lodging, the officer shifted his, and lying concealed in the same street, and, indeed, in the opposite house, soon found that Mr. Squeers and Mrs. Sliderskew were in constant communication.

In this state of things, Arthur Gride was appealed to. The robbery, partly owing to the inquisitiveness of the neighbors, and partly to his own grief and rage, had, long ago, become known; but he positively refused to give his sanction or yield any assistance to the old woman's capture, and was seized with such a panic at the idea of being called upon to give evidence against her, that he shut himself up close, in his house, and refused to hold communication with anybody. Upon this, the pursuers took counsel together, and, coming so near the truth as to arrive at the conclusion that Gride and Ralph, with Squeers for their instrument, were negotiating for

the recovery of some of the stolen papers which would not bear the light, and might possibly explain the hints relative to Madeline which Newman had overheard, resolved that Mrs. Sliderskew should be taken into custody before she had parted with them: and Squeers too, if anything suspicious could be attached to him. Accordingly, a search-warrant being procured, and all prepared, Mr. Squeers's window was watched, until his light was put out, and the time arrived when, as had been previously ascertained, he usually visited Mrs. Sliderskew. This done, Frank Cheeryble and Newman stole upstairs to listen to their discourse, and to give the signal to the officer at the most favorable time. At what an opportune moment they arrived, how they listened, and what they heard, is already known to the reader. Mr. Squeers, still half stunned, was hurried off with a stolen deed in his possession, and Mrs. Sliderskew was apprehended likewise. The information being promptly carried to Snawley that Squeers was in custody — he was not told for what — that worthy, first extorting a promise that he should be kept harmless, declared the whole tale concerning Smike to be a fiction and forgery, and implicated Ralph Nickleby to the fullest extent. As to Mr. Squeers, he had, that morning, undergone a private examination before a magistrate: and, being unable to account satisfactorily for his possession of the deed or his companionship with Mrs. Sliderskew, had been, with her, remanded for a week.

All these discoveries were now related to Ralph, circumstantially, and in detail. Whatever impression they secretly produced, he suffered no sign of emotion to escape him, but sat perfectly still, not raising his frowning eyes from the ground, and covering his

mouth with his hand. When the narrative was concluded, he raised his head hastily, as if about to speak, but on brother Charles resuming, fell into his old attitude again.

"I told you this morning," said the old gentleman, laying his hand upon his brother's shoulder, "that I came to you in mercy. How far you may be implicated in this last transaction, or how far the person who is now in custody may criminate you, you best know. But, justice must take its course against the parties implicated in the plot against this poor, unoffending, injured lad. It is not in my power, nor in the power of my brother Ned, to save you from the consequences. The utmost we can do, is, to warn you in time, and to give you an opportunity of escaping them. We would not have an old man like you disgraced and punished by your near relation; nor would we have him forget, like you, all ties of blood and nature. We entreat you — brother Ned, you join me, I know, in this entreaty, and so, Tim Linkinwater, do you, although you pretend to be an obstinate dog, sir, and sit there frowning as if you didn't — we entreat you to retire from London, to take shelter in some place where you will be safe from the consequences of these wicked designs, and where you may have time, sir, to atone for them, and to become a better man."

"And do you think," returned Ralph, rising, "and do you think, you will so easily crush *me?* Do you think that a hundred well-arranged plans, or a hundred suborned witnesses, or a hundred false curs at my heels, or a hundred canting speeches full of oily words, will move me? I thank you for disclosing your schemes, which I am now prepared for. You have not the man to deal with that you think; try me! and remember that I spit

upon your fair words and false dealings, and dare you — provoke you — taunt you — to do to me the very worst you can!"

Thus they parted, for that time; but the worst had not come yet.

CHAPTER LX.

THE DANGERS THICKEN, AND THE WORST IS TOLD.

Instead of going home, Ralph threw himself into the first street-cabriolet he could find, and, directing the driver towards the police-office of the district in which Mr. Squeers's misfortunes had occurred, alighted at a short distance from it, and, discharging the man, went the rest of his way thither on foot. Inquiring for the object of his solicitude, he learned that he had timed his visit well; for Mr. Squeers was, in fact, at that moment waiting for a hackney-coach he had ordered, and in which he purposed proceeding to his week's retirement, like a gentleman.

Demanding speech with the prisoner, he was ushered into a kind of waiting-room in which, by reason of his scholastic profession and superior respectability, Mr. Squeers had been permitted to pass the day. Here, by the light of a guttering and blackened candle, he could barely discern the school-master, fast asleep on a bench in a remote corner. An empty glass stood on a table before him, which, with his somnolent condition and a very strong smell of brandy and water, forewarned the visitor that Mr. Squeers had been seeking, in creature comforts, a temporary forgetfulness of his unpleasant situation.

It was not a very easy matter to rouse him: so lethargic and heavy were his slumbers. Regaining his faculties by slow and faint glimmerings, he at length sat upright; and, displaying a very yellow face, a very red nose, and a very bristly beard: the joint effect of which was considerably heightened by a dirty white handkerchief, spotted with blood, drawn over the crown of his head and tied under his chin: stared ruefully at Ralph in silence, until his feelings found a vent in this pithy sentence:

"I say, young fellow, you've been and done it now; you have!"

"What's the matter with your head?" asked Ralph.

"Why, your man, your informing kidnapping man, has been and broke it," rejoined Squeers sulkily; "that's what's the matter with it. You've come at last, have you?"

"Why have you not sent to me?" said Ralph. "How could I come till I knew what had befallen you?"

"My family!" hiccoughed Mr. Squeers, raising his eye to the ceiling; "my daughter, as is at that age when all the sensibilities is a-coming out strong in blow — my son as is the young Norval of private life, and the pride and ornament of a doting willage — here's a shock for my family! The coat of arms of the Squeerses is tore, and their sun is gone down into the ocean wave!"

"You have been drinking," said Ralph, "and have not yet slept yourself sober."

"I haven't been drinking *your* health, my codger," replied Mr. Squeers; "so you have nothing to do with that."

Ralph suppressed the indignation which the schoolmaster's altered and insolent manner awakened, and asked again why he had not sent to him.

"What should I get by sending to you?" returned Squeers. "To be known to be in with you, wouldn't do me a deal of good, and they won't take bail till they know something more of the case, so here am I hard and fast: and there are you, loose and comfortable."

"And so must you be, in a few days," retorted Ralph, with affected good-humor. "They can't hurt you, man."

"Why, I suppose they can't do much to me, if I explain how it was that I got into the good company of that there ca-daverous old Slider," replied Squeers viciously, "who I wish was dead and buried, and resurrected and dissected, and hung upon wires in a anatomical museum, before ever I'd had anything to do with her. This is what him with the powdered head says this morning, in so many words — 'Prisoner! As you have been found in company with this woman; as you were detected in possession of this document; as you were engaged with her in fraudulently destroying others, and can give no satisfactory account of yourself; I shall remand you for a week, in order that inquiries may be made, and evidence got — and meanwhile I can't take any bail for your appearance.' Well then, what I say now, is, that I *can* give a satisfactory account of myself; I can hand in the card of my establishment and say, '*I* am the Wackford Squeers as is therein named, sir. I am the man as is guaranteed, by unimpeachable references, to be a out-and-outer in morals and uprightness of principle. Whatever is wrong in this business is no fault of mine. I had no evil design in it, sir. I was not aware that anything was wrong. I was merely employed by a friend — my friend Mr. Ralph Nickleby, of Golden Square — send for him, sir, and ask him what he has to say — he's the man; not me!'"

"What document was it that you had?" asked Ralph, evading, for the moment, the point just raised.

"What document? Why, *the* document," replied Squeers. "The Madeline what's-her-name one. It was a will; that's what it was."

"Of what nature, whose will, when dated, how benefiting her, to what extent?" asked Ralph hurriedly.

"A will in her favor; that's all I know," rejoined Squeers, "and that's more than you'd have known, if you'd had them bellows on your head. It's all owing to your precious caution that they got hold of it. If you had let me burn it, and taken my word that it was gone, it would have been a heap of ashes behind the fire, instead of being whole and sound, inside of my great-coat."

"Beaten at every point!" muttered Ralph.

"Ah!" sighed Squeers, who, between the brandy and water and his broken head, wandered strangely, "at the delightful village of Dotheboys near Greta Bridge in Yorkshire, youth are boarded, clothed, booked, washed, furnished with pocket-money, provided with all necessaries, instructed in all languages living and dead, mathematics, orthography, geometry, astronomy, trigonometry — this is a altered state of trigonomics, this is! A double l — all, everything — a cobbler's weapon. U-p-up, adjective, not down. S-q-u- double e-r-s-Squeers, noun substantive, a educator of youth. Total, all up with Squeers!"

His running on, in this way, had afforded Ralph an opportunity of recovering his presence of mind, which at once suggested to him the necessity of removing, as far as possible, the school-master's misgivings, and leading him to believe that his safety and best policy lay in the preservation of a rigid silence.

"I tell you, once again," he said, "they can't hurt you. You shall have an action for false imprisonment, and make a profit of this, yet. We will devise a story for you that should carry you through twenty times such a trivial scrape as this; and if they want security in a thousand pounds for your reappearance in case you should be called upon, you shall have it. All you have to do, is, to keep back the truth. You're a little fuddled to-night, and may not be able to see this as clearly as you would at another time; but this is what you must do, and you'll need all your senses about you; for a slip might be awkward."

"Oh!" said Squeers, who had looked cunningly at him, with his head stuck on one side, like an old raven. "That's what I'm to do, is it? Now then, just you hear a word or two from me. I a'n't a-going to have any stories made for me, and I a'n't a-going to stick to any. If I find matters going again' me, I shall expect you to take your share, and I'll take care you do. You never said anything about danger. I never bargained for being brought into such a plight as this, and I don't mean to take it as quiet as you think. I let you lead me on, from one thing to another, because we had been mixed up together in a certain sort of a way, and if you had liked to be ill-natured you might perhaps have hurt the business, and if you liked to be good-natured you might throw a good deal in my way. Well; if all goes right now, that's quite correct, and I don't mind it; but if anything goes wrong, then, times are altered, and I shall just say and do whatever I think may serve me most, and take advice from nobody. My moral influence with them lads," added Mr. Squeers, with deeper gravity, "is a-tottering to its basis. The images of Mrs. Squeers,

my daughter, and my son Wackford, all short of vittles, is perpetually before me ; every other consideration melts away and vanishes, in front of these ; the only number in all arithmetic that I know of, as a husband and a father, is number one, under this here most fatal go ! "

How long Mr. Squeers might have declaimed, or how stormy a discussion his declamation might have led to, nobody knows. Being interrupted at this point, by the arrival of the coach and an attendant who was to bear him company, he perched his hat with great dignity on the top of the handkerchief that bound his head ; and, thrusting one hand in his pocket, and taking the attendant's arm with the other, suffered himself to be led forth.

"As I supposed from his not sending!" thought Ralph. " This fellow, I plainly see through all his tipsy fooling, has made up his mind to turn upon me. I am so beset and hemmed in, that they are, not only all struck with fear, but, like the beasts in the fable, have their fling at me now, though time was, and no longer ago than yesterday too, when they were all civility and compliance. But they shall not move me. I'll not give way. I will not budge one inch ! "

He went home, and was glad to find his house-keeper complaining of illness that he might have an excuse for being alone and sending her away to where she lived: which was hard by. Then, he sat down by the light of a single candle, and began to think, for the first time, on all that had taken place that day.

He had neither eaten nor drunk since last night, and, in addition to the anxiety of mind he had undergone, had been travelling about, from place to place almost incessantly, for many hours. He felt sick and exhausted, but could taste nothing save a glass of water, and continued

to sit with his head upon his hand — not resting or thinking, but laboriously trying to do both, and feeling that every sense but one of weariness and desolation, was for the time benumbed.

It was nearly ten o'clock when he heard a knocking at the door, and still sat quiet as before, as if he could not even bring his thoughts to bear upon that. It had been often repeated, and he had, several times, heard a voice outside, saying there was a light in the window (meaning, as he knew, his own candle), before he could rouse himself and go down stairs.

"Mr. Nickleby, there is terrible news for you, and I am sent to beg you will come with me directly," said a voice he seemed to recognize. He held his hand above his eyes, and, looking out, saw Tim Linkinwater on the steps.

"Come where?" demanded Ralph.

"To our house — where you came this morning. I have a coach here."

"Why should I go there?" said Ralph.

"Don't ask me why, but pray come with me."

"Another edition of to-day!" returned Ralph, making as though he would shut the door.

"No, no!" cried Tim, catching him by the arm and speaking most earnestly; "it is only that you may hear something that has occurred — something very dreadful, Mr. Nickleby, which concerns you nearly. Do you think I would tell you so, or come to you like this, if it were not the case?"

Ralph looked at him more closely. Seeing that he was indeed greatly excited, he faltered, and could not tell what to say or think.

"You had better hear this, now, than at any other

time," said Tim, "it may have some influence with you. For Heaven's sake come!"

Perhaps, at another time, Ralph's obstinacy and dislike would have been proof against any appeal from such a quarter, however emphatically urged; but now, after a moment's hesitation, he went into the hall for his hat, and returning, got into the coach without speaking a word.

Tim well remembered afterwards, and often said, that as Ralph Nickleby went into the house for this purpose, he saw him, by the light of the candle which he had set down upon a chair, reel and stagger like a drunken man. He well remembered, too, that when he had placed his foot upon the coach-steps, he turned round and looked upon him with a face so ashy pale and so very wild and vacant that it made him shudder, and for the moment almost afraid to follow. People were fond of saying that he had some dark presentiment upon him then, but his emotion might, perhaps, with greater show of reason, be referred to what he had undergone that day.

A profound silence was observed during the ride. Arrived at their place of destination, Ralph followed his conductor into the house, and into a room where the two brothers were. He was so astounded, not to say awed, by something of a mute compassion for himself which was visible in their manner and in that of the old clerk, that he could scarcely speak.

Having taken a seat, however, he contrived to say, though in broken words, "What — what have you to say to me — more than has been said already?"

The room was old and large, very imperfectly lighted, and terminated in a bay window: about which hung some heavy drapery. Casting his eyes in this direction, as he

spoke, he thought he made out the dusky figure of a man. He was confirmed in this impression by seeing that the object moved, as if uneasy under his scrutiny.

"Who's that yonder?" he said.

"One who has conveyed to us, within these two hours, the intelligence which caused our sending to you," replied brother Charles. "Let him be, sir, let him be for the present."

"More riddles!" said Ralph, faintly. "Well, sir?"

In turning his face towards the brothers he was obliged to avert it from the window; but, before either of them could speak, he had looked round again. It was evident that he was rendered restless and uncomfortable by the presence of the unseen person; for he repeated this action several times, and at length, as if in a nervous state which rendered him positively unable to turn away from the place, sat so as to have it opposite him, muttering as an excuse that he could not bear the light.

The brothers conferred apart for a short time: their manner showing that they were agitated. Ralph glanced at them twice or thrice, and ultimately said, with a great effort to recover his self-possession, "Now, what is this? If I am brought from home at this time of night, let it be for something. What have you got to tell me?" After a short pause, he added, "Is my niece dead?"

He had struck upon a key which rendered the task of commencement an easier one. Brother Charles turned, and said that it was a death of which they had to tell him, but that his niece was well.

"You don't mean to tell me," said Ralph, as his eyes brightened, "that her brother's dead. No, that's too good. I'd not believe it, if you told me so. It would be too welcome news to be true."

"Shame on you, you hardened and unnatural man," cried the other brother, warmly; "prepare yourself for intelligence, which, if you have any human feeling in your breast, will make even you shrink and tremble. What if we tell you that a poor unfortunate boy: a child in everything but never having known one of those tender endearments, or one of those lightsome hours which make our childhood a time to be remembered like a happy dream through all our after life: a warm-hearted, harmless, affectionate creature, who never offended you, or did you wrong, but on whom you have vented the malice and hatred you have conceived for your nephew, and whom you have made an instrument for wreaking your bad passions upon him: what if we tell you that, sinking under your persecution, sir, and the misery and ill-usage of a life short in years but long in suffering, this poor creature has gone to tell his sad tale where, for your part in it, you must surely answer?"

"If you tell me," said Ralph; "if you tell me that he is dead, I forgive you all else. If you tell me that he is dead, I am in your debt and bound to you for life. He is! I see it in your faces. Who triumphs now? Is this your dreadful news; this your terrible intelligence? You see how it moves me. You did well to send. I would have travelled a hundred miles a-foot, through mud, mire, and darkness, to hear this news just at this time."

Even then, moved as he was by this savage joy, Ralph could see in the faces of the two brothers, mingling with their look of disgust and horror, something of that indefinable compassion for himself which he had noticed before.

"And *he* brought you the intelligence, did he?" said Ralph, pointing with his finger towards the recess already mentioned; "and sat there, no doubt, to see me prostrated and overwhelmed by it! Ha, ha, ha! But I tell him that I'll be a sharp thorn in his side for many a long day to come; and I tell you two, again, that you don't know him yet; and that you'll rue the day you took compassion on the vagabond."

"You take me for your nephew," said a hollow voice; "it would be better for you and for me too, if I were he indeed."

The figure that he had seen so dimly, rose, and came slowly down. He started back, for he found that he confronted — not Nicholas, as he had supposed, but Brooker.

Ralph had no reason, that he knew, to fear this man; he had never feared him before; but the pallor which had been observed in his face when he issued forth that night, came upon him again. He was seen to tremble, and his voice changed as he said, keeping his eyes upon him,

"What does this fellow here? Do you know he is a convict — a felon — a common thief!"

"Hear what he has to tell you — oh, Mr. Nickleby, hear what he has to tell you, be he what he may!" cried the brothers, with such emphatic earnestness, that Ralph turned to them in wonder. They pointed to Brooker. Ralph again gazed at him: as it seemed mechanically.

"That boy," said the man, "that these gentlemen have been talking of" ——

"That boy," repeated Ralph, looking vacantly at him.

"Whom I saw, stretched dead and cold upon his bed, and who is now in his grave" ——

"Who is now in his grave," echoed Ralph, like one who talks in his sleep.

The man raised his eyes, and clasped his hands solemnly together:

——"Was your only son, so help me God in heaven!"

In the midst of a dead silence, Ralph sat down, pressing his two hands upon his temples. He removed them, after a minute, and never was there seen, part of a living man undisfigured by any wound, such a ghastly face as he then disclosed. He looked at Brooker, who was by this time standing at a short distance from him; but did not say one word, or make the slightest sound or gesture.

"Gentlemen," said the man, "I offer no excuses for myself. I am long past that. If, in telling you how this has happened, I tell you that I was harshly used and perhaps driven out of my real nature, I do it, only as a necessary part of my story, and not to shield myself. I am a guilty man."

He stopped, as if to recollect, and looking away from Ralph, and addressing himself to the brothers, proceeded in a subdued and humble tone:

"Among those who once had dealings with this man, gentlemen — that's from twenty to five-and-twenty years ago — there was one: a rough fox-hunting, hard-drinking gentleman, who had run through his own fortune, and wanted to squander away that of his sister; they were both orphans, and she lived with him and managed his house. I don't know whether it was, originally, to back his influence and try to over-persuade the young woman or not, but he," pointing to Ralph, "used to go

down to the house in Leicestershire pretty often, and stop there many days at a time. They had had a great many dealings together, and he may have gone, on some of those, or to patch up his client's affairs, which were in a ruinous state — of course he went for profit. The gentlewoman was not a girl, but she was, I have heard say, handsome, and entitled to a pretty large property. In course of time, he married her. The same love of gain which led him to contract this marriage, led to its being kept strictly private; for a clause in her father's will declared that if she married without her brother's consent, the property, in which she had only some life interest while she remained single, should pass away altogether to another branch of the family. The brother would give no consent that the sister didn't buy, and pay for handsomely; Mr. Nickleby would consent to no such sacrifice; and so, they went on, keeping their marriage secret, and waiting for him to break his neck or die of a fever. He did neither, and meanwhile the result of this private marriage was a son. The child was put out to nurse, a long way off; his mother never saw him but once or twice and then by stealth; and his father — so eagerly did he thirst after the money which seemed to come almost within his grasp now, for his brother-in-law was very ill, and breaking more and more every day — never went near him, to avoid raising any suspicion. The brother lingered on; Mr. Nickleby's wife constantly urged him to avow their marriage; he peremptorily refused. She remained alone in a dull country house: seeing little or no company but riotous, drunken sportsmen. He lived in London and clung to his business. Angry quarrels and recriminations took place, and when they had been married nearly seven years, and were

within a few weeks of the time when the brother's death would have adjusted all, she eloped with a younger man, and left him."

Here, he paused, but Ralph did not stir, and the brothers signed to him to proceed.

"It was then, that I became acquainted with these circumstances from his own lips. They were no secrets then; for the brother, and others, knew them; but they were communicated to me — not on this account, but because I was wanted. He followed the fugitives — some said to make money of his wife's shame, but, I believe, to take some violent revenge, for that was as much his character as the other — perhaps more. He didn't find them, and she died not long after. I don't know whether he began to think he might like the child, or whether he wished to make sure that it should never fall into its mother's hands; but before he went, he intrusted me with the charge of bringing it home. And I did so."

He went on, from this point, in a still more humble tone, and spoke in a very low voice: pointing to Ralph as he resumed.

"He had used me ill — cruelly — I reminded him in what, not long ago when I met him in the street — and I hated him. I brought the child home to his own house and lodged him in the front garret. Neglect had made him very sickly, and I was obliged to call in a doctor, who said he must be removed for change of air, or he would die. I think that, first put it in my head. I did it then. He was gone six weeks, and when he came back, I told him — with every circumstance well planned and proved; nobody could have suspected me — that the child was dead and buried. He might have been disappointed in some intention he had formed, or he might

have had some natural affection, but he *was* grieved at *that*, and I was confirmed in my design of opening up the secret one day, and making it a means of getting money from him. I had heard, like most other men, of Yorkshire schools. I took the child to one kept by a man named Squeers, and left it there. I gave him the name of Smike. Year by year, I paid twenty pounds a year for him for six years: never breathing the secret all the time: for I had left his father's service after more hard usage, and quarrelled with him again. I was sent away from this country. I have been away, nearly eight years. Directly I came home again, I travelled down into Yorkshire, and, skulking in the village of an evening-time, made inquiries about the boys at the school, and found that this one, whom I had placed there, had run away with a young man bearing the name of his own father. I sought his father out in London, and hinting at what I could tell him, tried for a little money to support life; but he repulsed me with threats. I then found out his clerk, and, going on from little to little, and showing him that there were good reasons for communicating with me, learnt what was going on; and it was I who told him that the boy was no son of the man who claimed to be his father. All this time I had never seen the boy. At length, I heard from this same source that he was very ill, and where he was. I travelled down there, that I might recall myself, if possible, to his recollection and confirm my story. I came upon him unexpectedly; but before I could speak he knew me — he had good cause to remember me, poor lad! — and I would have sworn to him if I had met him in the Indies. I knew the piteous face I had seen in the little child. After a few days' indecision, I applied

to the young gentleman in whose care he was, and I found that he was dead. He knows how quickly he recognized me again, how often he had described me and my leaving him at the school, and how he told him of a garret he recollected: which is the one I have spoken of, and in his father's house to this day. This is my story. I demand to be brought face to face with the schoolmaster, and put to any possible proof of any part of it, and I will show that it's too true, and that I have this guilt upon my soul."

"Unhappy man!" said the brothers. "What reparation can you make for this?"

"None, gentlemen, none! I have none to make, and nothing to hope now. I am old in years, and older still in misery and care. This confession can bring nothing upon me but new suffering and punishment; but I make it, and will abide by it whatever comes. I have been made the instrument of working out this dreadful retribution upon the head of a man who, in the hot pursuit of his bad ends, has persecuted and hunted down his own child to death. It must descend upon me too — I know it must fall — my reparation comes too late; and, neither in this world nor in the next, can I have hope again!"

He had hardly spoken, when the lamp, which stood upon the table close to where Ralph was seated, and which was the only one in the room, was thrown to the ground, and left them in darkness. There was some trifling confusion in obtaining another light; the interval was a mere nothing; but when the light appeared, Ralph Nickleby was gone.

The good brothers and Tim Linkinwater occupied some time in discussing the probability of his return;

and, when it became apparent that he would not come back, they hesitated whether or no to send after him. At length, remembering how strangely and silently he had sat in one immovable position during the interview, and thinking he might possibly be ill, they determined, although it was now very late, to send to his house on some pretence. Finding an excuse in the presence of Brooker, whom they knew not how to dispose of, without consulting his wishes, they concluded to act upon this resolution before going to bed.

CHAPTER LXI.

WHEREIN NICHOLAS AND HIS SISTER FORFEIT THE GOOD OPINION OF ALL WORLDLY AND PRUDENT PEOPLE.

On the next morning after Brooker's disclosure had been made, Nicholas returned home. The meeting between him and those whom he had left there, was not without strong emotion on both sides; for they had been informed by his letters of what had occurred: and, besides that his griefs were theirs, they mourned with him the death of one whose forlorn and helpless state had first established a claim upon their compassion, and whose truth of heart and grateful earnest nature had, every day, endeared him to them more and more.

"I am sure," said Mrs. Nickleby, wiping her eyes, and sobbing bitterly, "I have lost the best, the most zealous, and most attentive creature, that has ever been a companion to me in my life — putting you, my dear Nicholas, and Kate, and your poor papa, and that well-behaved nurse who ran away with the linen and the twelve small forks, out of the question, of course. Of all the tractable, equal-tempered, attached, and faithful beings that ever lived, I believe he was the most so. To look round upon the garden, now, that he took so much pride in, or to go into his room and see it filled

with so many of those little contrivances for our comfort that he was so fond of making, and made so well, and so little thought he would leave unfinished — I can't bear it, I cannot really. Ah! This is a great trial to me, a great trial. It will be a comfort to you, my dear Nicholas, to the end of your life, to recollect how kind and good you always were to him — so it will be to me, to think what excellent terms we were always upon, and how fond he always was of me, poor fellow! It was very natural you should have been attached to him, my dear — very — and of course you were, and are very much cut up by this. I am sure it's only necessary to look at you and see how changed you are, to see that; but nobody knows what my feelings are — nobody can — it's quite impossible!"

While Mrs. Nickleby, with the utmost sincerity, gave vent to her sorrows after her own peculiar fashion of considering herself foremost, she was not the only one who indulged such feelings. Kate, although well accustomed to forget herself when others were to be considered, could not repress her grief; Madeline was scarcely less moved than she; and poor, hearty, honest, little Miss La Creevy, who had come upon one of her visits while Nicholas was away, and had done nothing, since the sad news arrived, but console and cheer them all, no sooner beheld him coming in at the door, than she sat herself down upon the stairs, and bursting into a flood of tears, refused for a long time to be comforted.

"It hurts me so," cried the poor body, "to see him come back alone. I can't help thinking what he must have suffered himself. I wouldn't mind so much if he gave way a little more; but he bears it so manfully."

"Why, so I should," said Nicholas, "should I not?"

"Yes, yes," replied the little woman, "and bless you for a good creature! but this does seem at first to a simple soul like me — I know it's wrong to say so, and I shall be sorry for it presently — this does seem such a poor reward for all you have done."

"Nay," said Nicholas gently, "what better reward could I have, than the knowledge that his last days were peaceful and happy, and the recollection that I was his constant companion, and was not prevented, as I might have been by a hundred circumstances, from being beside him?"

"To be sure," sobbed Miss La Creevy; "it's very true, and I'm an ungrateful, impious, wicked little fool, I know."

With that, the good soul fell to crying afresh, and, endeavoring to recover herself, tried to laugh. The laugh and the cry meeting each other thus abruptly, had a struggle for the mastery; the result was, that it was a drawn battle, and Miss La Creevy went into hysterics.

Waiting until they were all tolerably quiet and composed again, Nicholas, who stood in need of some rest after his long journey, retired to his own room, and throwing himself, dressed as he was, upon the bed, fell into a sound sleep. When he awoke, he found Kate sitting by his bedside, who, seeing that he had opened his eyes, stooped down to kiss him.

"I came to tell you how glad I am to see you home again."

"But I can't tell you how glad I am to see you, Kate."

"We have been wearying so, for your return," said Kate, "mamma and I, and — and Madeline."

"You said in your last letter that she was quite well," said Nicholas, rather hastily, and coloring as he spoke. "Has nothing been said, since I have been away, about any future arrangements that the brothers have in contemplation for her?"

"Oh, not a word," replied Kate, "I can't think of parting from her without sorrow; and surely, Nicholas, *you* don't wish it!"

Nicholas colored again, and, sitting down beside his sister on a little couch near the window, said:

"No, Kate, no, I do not. I might strive to disguise my real feelings from anybody but you; but I will tell you that — briefly and plainly, Kate — that I love her."

Kate's eyes brightened, and she was going to make some reply, when Nicholas laid his hand upon her arm, and went on:

"Nobody must know this but you. She, last of all."

"Dear Nicholas!"

"Last of all — never, though never is a long day. Sometimes, I try to think that the time may come when I may honestly tell her this; but it is so far off, in such distant perspective, so many years must elapse before it comes, and when it does come (if ever) I shall be so unlike what I am now, and shall have so outlived my days of youth and romance — though not, I am sure, of love for her — that even I feel how visionary all such hopes must be, and try to crush them rudely, myself, and have the pain over, rather than suffer time to wither them, and keep the disappointment in store. No, Kate! Since I have been absent, I have had, in that poor fellow who is gone, perpetually before my eyes, another instance of the munificent

liberality of these noble brothers. As far as in me lies, I will deserve it, and if I have wavered in my bounden duty to them before, I am now determined to discharge it rigidly, and to put further delays and temptations beyond my reach."

"Before you say another word, dear Nicholas," said Kate, turning pale, "you must hear what I have to tell you. I came on purpose, but I had not the courage. What you say now, gives me new heart." She faltered, and burst into tears.

There was that, in her manner, which prepared Nicholas for what was coming. Kate tried to speak, but her tears prevented her.

"Come, you foolish girl," said Nicholas; "why Kate, Kate, be a woman! I think I know what you would tell me. It concerns Mr. Frank, does it not?"

Kate sunk her head upon his shoulder, and sobbed out "Yes."

"And he has offered you his hand, perhaps, since I have been away," said Nicholas; "is that it? Yes. Well, well; it's not so difficult, you see, to tell me, after all. He offered you his hand?"

"Which I refused," said Kate.

"Yes; and why?"

"I told him," she said, in a trembling voice, "all that I have since found you told mamma; and while I could not conceal from him, and cannot from you that — that it was a pang and a great trial, I did so, firmly, and begged him not to see me any more."

"That's my own brave Kate!" said Nicholas, pressing her to his breast. "I knew you would."

"He tried to alter my resolution," said Kate, "and declared that, be my decision what it might, he would

not only inform his uncles of the step he had taken, but would communicate it to you also, directly you returned. I am afraid," she added: her momentary composure forsaking her, "I am afraid I may not have said, strongly enough, how deeply I felt such disinterested love, and how earnestly I prayed for his future happiness. If you do talk together, I should — I should like him to know that."

"And did you suppose, Kate, when you had made this sacrifice to what you knew was right and honorable, that I should shrink from mine?" said Nicholas tenderly.

"Oh, no! not if your position had been the same, but" —

"But it is the same," interrupted Nicholas; "Madeline is not the near relation of our benefactors, but she is closely bound to them by ties as dear; and I was first intrusted with her history, specially because they reposed unbounded confidence in me, and believed that I was as true as steel. How base would it be of me to take advantage of the circumstances which placed her here, or of the slight service I was happily able to render her, and to seek to engage her affections when the result must be, if I succeeded, that the brothers would be disappointed in their darling wish of establishing her as their own child, and that I must seem to hope to build my fortunes on their compassion for the young creature whom I had so meanly and unworthily entrapped: turning her very gratitude and warmth of heart to my own purpose and account, and trading in her misfortunes! I, too, whose duty, and pride, and pleasure, Kate, it is, to have other claims upon me which I will never forget: and who have the

means of a comfortable and happy life already, and have no right to look beyond it! I have determined to remove this weight from my mind. I doubt whether I have not done wrong, even now; and to-day I will, without reserve or equivocation, disclose my real reasons to Mr. Cheeryble, and implore him to take immediate measures for removing this young lady to the shelter of some other roof."

"To-day? so very soon!"

"I have thought of this, for weeks, and why should I postpone it? If the scene through which I have just passed, has taught me to reflect, and has awakened me to a more anxious and careful sense of duty, why should I wait until the impression has cooled? You would not dissuade me, Kate; now would you?"

"You may grow rich, you know," said Kate.

"I may grow rich!" repeated Nicholas, with a mournful smile, "aye, and I may grow old! But rich or poor, or old or young, we shall ever be the same to each other, and in that our comfort lies. What if we have but one home? It can never be a solitary one to you and me. What if we were to remain so true to these first impressions as to form no others? It is but one more link to the strong chain that binds us together. It seems but yesterday that we were playfellows, Kate, and it will seem but to-morrow when we are staid old people, looking back to these cares as we look back, now, to those of our childish days: and recollecting with a melancholy pleasure that the time was, when they could move us. Perhaps then, when we are quaint old folks and talk of the times when our step was lighter and our hair not gray, we may be even thankful for the trials that so endeared us to each other, and turned our lives

into that current, down which we shall have glided so peacefully and calmly. And having caught some inkling of our story, the young people about us — as young as you and I are now, Kate — may come to us for sympathy, and pour distresses which hope and inexperience could scarcely feel enough for, into the compassionate ears of the old bachelor brother and his maiden sister."

Kate smiled through her tears, as Nicholas drew this picture; but they were not tears of sorrow, although they continued to fall when he had ceased to speak.

"Am I not right, Kate?" he said, after a short silence.

"Quite, quite, dear brother; and I cannot tell you how happy I am, that I have acted as you would have had me."

"You don't regret?"

"N—n—no," said Kate, timidly, tracing some pattern upon the ground with her little foot. "I don't regret having done what was honorable and right, of course; but I do regret that this should have ever happened — at least sometimes I regret it, and sometimes I — I don't know what I say; I am but a weak girl, Nicholas, and it has agitated me very much."

It is no vaunt to affirm that if Nicholas had had ten thousand pounds at the minute, he would, in his generous affection for the owner of the blushing cheek and downcast eye, have bestowed its utmost farthing, in perfect forgetfulness of himself, to secure her happiness. But all he could do was to comfort and console her by kind words; and words they were of such love and kindness, and cheerful encouragement, that poor Kate threw her arms about his neck, and declared she would weep no more.

"What man," thought Nicholas proudly, while on his way, soon afterwards, to the brothers' house, "would not be sufficiently rewarded for any sacrifice of fortune, by the possession of such a heart as Kate's, which, but that hearts weigh light, and gold and silver heavy, is beyond all praise! Frank has money and wants no more. Where would it buy him such a treasure as Kate! And yet, in unequal marriages, the rich party is always supposed to make a great sacrifice, and the other to get a good bargain! But I am thinking like a lover, or like an ass: which I suppose is pretty nearly the same."

Checking thoughts so little adapted to the business on which he was bound, by such self-reproofs as this and many others no less sturdy, he proceeded on his way and presented himself before Tim Linkinwater.

"Ah! Mr. Nickleby!" cried Tim, "God bless you! how d'ye do! Well? Say you're quite well and never better — do now."

"Quite," said Nicholas, shaking him by both hands.

"Ah!" said Tim, "you look tired though, now I come to look at you. Hark! there he is, d'ye hear him? That was Dick, the blackbird. He hasn't been himself, since you've been gone. He'd never get on without you, now; he takes as naturally to you, as he does to me."

"Dick is a far less sagacious fellow than I supposed him, if he thinks I am half so well worthy of his notice as you," replied Nicholas.

"Why, I'll tell you what, sir," said Tim, standing in his favorite attitude and pointing to the cage with the feather of his pen, "it's a very extraordinary thing about that bird, that the only people he ever takes the smallest notice of, are Mr. Charles, and Mr. Ned, and you, and me."

Here, Tim stopped and glanced anxiously at Nicholas; then unexpectedly catching his eye repeated, "And you and me, sir, and you and me." And then he glanced at Nicholas again, and, squeezing his hand, said, "I am a bad one at putting off anything I am interested in. I didn't mean to ask you, but I should like to hear a few particulars about that poor boy. Did he mention Cheeryble Brothers at all?"

"Yes," said Nicholas, "many and many a time."

"That was right of him," returned Tim, wiping his eyes; "that was very right of him."

"And he mentioned your name a score of times," said Nicholas, "and often bade me carry back his love to Mr. Linkinwater."

"No, no, did he though?" rejoined Tim, sobbing outright. "Poor fellow! I wish we could have had him buried in town. There isn't such a burying-ground in all London, as that little one on the other side of the square — there are counting-houses all round it, and if you go in there, on a fine day, you can see the books and safes through the open windows. And he sent his love to me, did he? I didn't expect he would have thought of me. Poor fellow, poor fellow! His love too!"

Tim was so completely overcome by this little mark of recollection, that he was quite unequal to any more conversation at the moment. Nicholas therefore slipped quietly out, and went to brother Charles's room.

If he had previously sustained his firmness and fortitude, it had been by an effort which had cost him no little pain; but the warm welcome, the hearty manner, the homely unaffected commiseration, of the good old man, went to his heart, and no inward struggle could prevent his showing it.

"Come, come, my dear sir," said the benevolent merchant; "we must not be cast down; no, no. We must learn to bear misfortune, and we must remember that there are many sources of consolation even in death. Every day that this poor lad had lived, he must have been less and less qualified for the world, and more and more unhappy in his own deficiencies. It is better as it is, my dear sir. Yes, yes, yes, it's better as it is."

"I have thought of all that, sir," replied Nicholas, clearing his throat. "I feel it, I assure you."

"Yes, that's well," replied Mr. Cheeryble, who, in the midst of all his comforting, was quite as much taken aback as honest old Tim; "that's well. Where is my brother Ned? Tim Linkinwater, sir, where is my brother Ned?"

"Gone out with Mr. Trimmers, about getting that unfortunate man into the hospital, and sending a nurse to his children," said Tim.

"My brother Ned is a fine fellow — a great fellow!" exclaimed brother Charles as he shut the door and returned to Nicholas. "He will be overjoyed to see you, my dear sir. We have been speaking of you every day."

"To tell you the truth, sir, I am glad to find you alone," said Nicholas, with some natural hesitation; "for I am anxious to say something to you. Can you spare me a very few minutes?"

"Surely, surely," returned brother Charles, looking at him with an anxious countenance. "Say on, my dear sir, say on."

"I scarcely know how, or where, to begin," said Nicholas. "If ever one mortal had reason to be penetrated with love and reverence for another: with such attach-

ment as would make the hardest service in his behalf a pleasure and delight: with such grateful recollections as must rouse the utmost zeal and fidelity of his nature: those are the feelings which I should entertain for you, and do, from my heart and soul, believe me!"

"I do believe you," replied the old gentleman, "and I am happy in the belief. I have never doubted it; I never shall. I am sure I never shall."

"Your telling me that, so kindly," said Nicholas, "emboldens me to proceed. When you first took me into your confidence, and despatched me on those missions to Miss Bray, I should have told you that I had seen her, long before; that her beauty had made an impression upon me which I could not efface; and that I had fruitlessly endeavored to trace her, and become acquainted with her history. I did not tell you so, because I vainly thought I could conquer my weaker feelings, and render every consideration subservient to my duty to you."

"Mr. Nickleby," said brother Charles, "you did not violate the confidence I placed in you, or take an unworthy advantage of it. I am sure you did not."

"I did not," said Nicholas, firmly. "Although I found that the necessity for self-command and restraint became every day more imperious, and the difficulty greater, I never, for one instant, spoke or looked but as I would have done had you been by. I never, for one moment, deserted my trust, nor have I to this instant. But I find that constant association and companionship with this sweet girl is fatal to my peace of mind, and may prove destructive to the resolutions I made in the beginning and up to this time have faithfully kept. In short, sir, I cannot trust myself, and I implore and beseech you to remove this young lady from under the charge of my

mother and sister, without delay. I know that to any one but myself — to you, who consider the immeasurable distance between me and this young lady, who is now your ward, and the object of your peculiar care — my loving her, even in thought, must appear the height of rashness and presumption. I know it is so. But, who can see her as I have seen, — who can know what her life has been — and not love her? I have no excuse but that; and as I cannot fly from this temptation, and cannot repress this passion, with its object constantly before me, what can I do but pray and beseech you to remove it, and to leave me to forget her!"

"Mr. Nickleby," said the old man, after a short silence, "you can do no more. I was wrong to expose a young man like you, to this trial. I might have foreseen what would happen. Thank you, sir, thank you. Madeline shall be removed."

"If you would grant me one favor, dear sir, and suffer her to remember me with esteem, by never revealing to her this confession" —

"I will take care," — said Mr. Cheeryble. "And now, is this all you have to tell me?"

"No!" returned Nicholas, meeting his eye, "it is not."

"I know the rest," said Mr. Cheeryble, apparently very much relieved by this prompt reply. "When did it come to your knowledge?"

"When I reached home this morning."

"You felt it your duty immediately to come to me, and tell me what your sister no doubt acquainted you with?"

"I did," said Nicholas, "though I could have wished to have spoken to Mr. Frank first."

"Frank was with me last night," replied the old gentleman. "You have done well, Mr. Nickleby — very well, sir, — and I thank you again."

Upon this head, Nicholas requested permission to add a few words. He ventured to hope that nothing he had said, would lead to the estrangement of Kate and Madeline, who had formed an attachment for each other, any interruption of which, would, he knew, be attended with great pain to them, and, most of all, with remorse and pain to him, as its unhappy cause. When these things were all forgotten, he hoped that Frank and he might still be warm friends, and that no word or thought of his humble home, or of her who was well contented to remain there and share his quiet fortunes, would ever again disturb the harmony between them. He recounted, as nearly as he could, what had passed between himself and Kate that morning: speaking of her with such warmth of pride and affection, and dwelling so cheerfully upon the confidence they had, of overcoming any selfish regrets and living contented and happy in each other's love, that few could have heard him unmoved. More moved himself than he had been yet, he expressed in a few hurried words — as expressive, perhaps, as the most eloquent phrases — his devotion to the brothers, and his hope that he might live and die in their service.

To all this, brother Charles listened in profound silence, and with his chair so turned from Nicholas that his face could not be seen. He had not spoken either, in his accustomed manner, but with a certain stiffness and embarrassment very foreign to it. Nicholas feared he had offended him. He said, "No — no — he had done quite right," but that was all.

"Frank is a heedless, foolish fellow," he said, after

Nicholas had paused for some time; "a very heedless, foolish fellow. I will take care that this is brought to a close without delay. Let us say no more upon the subject; it's a very painful one to me. Come to me in half an hour, I have strange things to tell you, my dear sir, and your uncle has appointed this afternoon for your waiting upon him with me."

"Waiting upon him! With you sir!" cried Nicholas.

"Aye, with me," replied the old gentleman. "Return to me in half an hour, and I'll tell you more."

Nicholas waited upon him at the time mentioned, and then learnt all that had taken place on the previous day, and all that was known of the appointment Ralph had made with the brothers; which was for that night; and for the better understanding of which it will be requisite to return and follow his own footsteps from the house of the twin brothers. Therefore, we leave Nicholas somewhat reassured by the restored kindness of their manner towards him, and yet sensible that it was different from what it had been (though he scarcely knew in what respect): full of uneasiness, uncertainty, and disquiet.

CHAPTER LXII.

RALPH MAKES ONE LAST APPOINTMENT — AND KEEPS IT.

CREEPING from the house, and slinking off like a thief; groping with his hands when first he got into the street as if he were a blind man; and looking often over his shoulder while he hurried away, as though he were followed in imagination or reality by some one anxious to question or detain him; Ralph Nickleby left the city behind him, and took the road to his own home.

The night was dark, and a cold wind blew, driving the clouds, furiously and fast, before it. There was one black, gloomy mass that seemed to follow him: not hurrying in the wild chase with the others, but lingering sullenly behind, and gliding darkly and stealthily on. He often looked back at this, and, more than once, stopped to let it pass over; but, somehow, when he went forward again, it was still behind him, coming mournfully and slowly up, like a shadowy funeral train.

He had to pass a poor, mean burial-ground — a dismal place, raised a few feet above the level of the street, and parted from it by a low parapet-wall and an iron railing; a rank, unwholesome, rotten spot, where the very grass and weeds seemed, in their frowzy growth, to tell that they had sprung from paupers' bodies, and had struck their roots in the graves of men, sodden, while

alive, in steaming courts and drunken hungry dens. And here, in truth, they lay, parted from the living by a little earth and a board or two — lay thick and close — corrupting in body as they had in mind — a dense and squalid crowd. Here they lay, cheek by jowl with life: no deeper down than the feet of the throng that passed there, every day, and piled high as their throats. Here they lay, a grisly family, all these dear departed brothers and sisters of the ruddy clergyman who did his task so speedily when they were hidden in the ground!

As he passed here, Ralph called to mind that he had been one of a jury, long before, on the body of a man who had cut his throat; and that he was buried in this place. He could not tell how he came to recollect it now, when he had so often passed and never thought about him, or how it was that he felt an interest in the circumstance; but he did both; and stopping, and clasping the iron railings with his hands, looked eagerly in, wondering which might be his grave.

While he was thus engaged, there came towards him, with noise of shouts and singing, some fellows full of drink, followed by others, who were remonstrating with them and urging them to go home in quiet. They were in high good-humor; and one of them, a little, weazen, hump-backed man, began to dance. He was a grotesque, fantastic figure, and the few by-standers laughed. Ralph himself was moved to mirth, and echoed the laugh of one who stood near and who looked round in his face. When they had passed on, and he was left alone again, he resumed his speculation with a new kind of interest; for he recollected that the last person who had seen the suicide alive, had left him very merry, and he remembered how strange he and the other jurors had thought that, at the time.

He could not fix upon the spot among such a heap of graves, but he conjured up a strong and vivid idea of the man himself, and how he looked, and what had led him to do it: all of which he recalled with ease. By dint of dwelling upon this theme, he carried the impression with him when he went away: as he remembered, when a child, to have had frequently before him the figure of some goblin he had once seen chalked upon a door. But as he drew nearer and nearer home he forgot it again, and began to think how very dull and solitary the house would be inside.

This feeling became so strong at last, that when he reached his own door, he could hardly make up his mind to turn the key and open it. When he had done that, and gone into the passage, he felt as though to shut it again would be to shut out the world. But he let it go, and it closed with a loud noise. There was no light. How very dreary, cold, and still it was!

Shivering from head to foot he made his way up-stairs into the room where he had been last disturbed. He had made a kind of compact with himself that he would not think of what had happened, until he got home. He was at home now, and suffered himself to consider it.

His own child — his own child! He never doubted the tale; he felt it was true; knew it as well, now, as if he had been privy to it all along. His own child! And dead too. Dying beside Nicholas — loving him, and looking upon him as something like an angel! That was the worst.

They had all turned from him and deserted him in his very first need. Even money could not buy them now; everything must come out, and everybody must know all. Here was the young lord dead, his companion

abroad and beyond his reach, ten thousand pounds gone at one blow, his plot with Gride overset at the very moment of triumph, his after schemes discovered, himself in danger, the object of his persecution and Nicholas's love, his own wretched boy; everything crumbled and fallen upon him, and he beaten down beneath the ruins and grovelling in the dust.

If he had known his child to be alive; if no deceit had been ever practised, and he had grown up, beneath his eye; he might have been a careless, indifferent, rough, harsh father — like enough — he felt that; but the thought would come that he might have been otherwise, and that his son might have been a comfort to him and they two happy together. He began to think now, that his supposed death and his wife's flight had had some share in making him the morose, hard man he was. He seemed to remember a time when he was not quite so rough and obdurate; and almost thought that he had first hated Nicholas, because he was young and gallant, and perhaps like the stripling who had brought dishonor and loss of fortune on his head.

But one tender thought, or one of natural regret, in his whirlwind of passion and remorse, was as a drop of calm water in a stormy maddened sea. His hatred of Nicholas had been fed upon his own defeat, nourished on his interference with his schemes, fattened upon his old defiance and success. There were reasons for its increase; it had grown and strengthened gradually. Now it attained a height which was sheer wild lunacy. That his, of all others, should have been the hands to rescue his miserable child; that he should have been his protector and faithful friend; that he should have shown him that love and tenderness which, from the wretched

moment of his birth, he had never known; that he should have taught him to hate his own parent and execrate his very name; that he should now know and feel all this, and triumph in the recollection; was gall and madness to the usurer's heart. The dead boy's love for Nicholas, and the attachment of Nicholas to him, was insupportable agony. The picture of his death-bed, with Nicholas at his side, tending and supporting him, and he breathing out his thanks, and expiring in his arms, when he would have had them mortal enemies and hating each other to the last, drove him frantic. He gnashed his teeth, and smote the air, and looking wildly round, with eyes which gleamed through the darkness, cried aloud:

"I am trampled down and ruined. The wretch told me true. The night has come! Is there no way to rob them of further triumph, and spurn their mercy and compassion? Is there no devil to help me?"

Swiftly, there glided again into his brain the figure he had raised that night. It seemed to lie before him. The head was covered now. So it was when he first saw it. The rigid, upturned, marble feet too, he remembered well. Then came before him the pale and trembling relatives who had told their tale upon the inquest — the shrieks of women — the silent dread of men — the consternation and disquiet — the victory achieved by that heap of clay, which, with one motion of its hand, had let out the life and made this stir among them ——

He spoke no more; but, after a pause, softly groped his way out of the room, and up the echoing stairs — up to the top — to the front garret — where he closed the door behind him, and remained ——

It was a mere lumber-room now, but it yet contained an old dismantled bedstead; the one on which his son

had slept; for no other had ever been there. He avoided it hastily, and sat down as far from it as he could.

The weakened glare of the lights in the street below, shining through the window which had no blind or curtain to intercept it, was enough to show the character of the room, though not sufficient fully to reveal the various articles of lumber, old corded trunks and broken furniture, which were scattered about. It had a shelving roof; high in one part, and at another descending almost to the floor. It was towards the highest part, that Ralph directed his eyes; and, upon it, he kept them fixed steadily for some minutes, when he rose, and dragging thither an old chest upon which he had been seated, mounted on it, and felt along the wall above his head with both hands. At length, they touched a large iron hook, firmly driven into one of the beams.

At that moment, he was interrupted by a loud knocking at the door below. After a little hesitation he opened the window, and demanded who it was.

"I want Mr. Nickleby," replied a voice.

"What with him?"

"That's not Mr. Nickleby's voice surely?" was the rejoinder.

It was not like it; but it was Ralph who spoke, and so he said.

The voice made answer that the twin Brothers wished to know whether the man whom he had seen that night, was to be detained; and that although it was now midnight they had sent, in their anxiety to do right.

"Yes," cried Ralph, "detain him till to-morrow; then let them bring him here — him and my nephew — and come themselves, and be sure that I will be ready to receive them."

"At what hour?" asked the voice.

"At any hour," replied Ralph fiercely. "In the afternoon, tell them. At any hour — at any minute — all times will be alike to me."

He listened to the man's retreating footsteps, until the sound had passed, and then, gazing up into the sky, saw, or thought he saw, the same black cloud that had seemed to follow him home, and which now appeared to hover directly above the house.

"I know its meaning now," he muttered, "and the restless nights, the dreams, and why I have quailed of late — all pointed to this. Oh! if men by selling their own souls could ride rampant for a term, for how short a term would I barter mine to-night!"

The sound of a deep bell came along the wind. One.

"Lie on!" cried the usurer, "with your iron tongue! Ring merrily for births that make expectants writhe, and marriages that are made in hell, and toll ruefully for the dead whose shoes are worn already! Call men to prayers who are godly because not found out, and ring chimes for the coming in of every year that brings this cursed world nearer to its end. No bell or book for me! Throw me on a dunghill, and let me rot there, to infect the air!"

With a wild look around, in which frenzy, hatred, and despair, were horribly mingled, he shook his clinched hand at the sky above him, which was still dark and threatening, and closed the window.

The rain and hail pattered against the glass; the chimneys quaked and rocked; the crazy casement rattled with the wind, as though an impatient hand inside were striving to burst it open. But no hand was there, and it opened no more.

* * * * *

"How's this?" cried one. "The gentlemen say they can't make anybody hear, and have been trying these two hours?"

"And yet he came home last night," said another; "for he spoke to somebody out of that window upstairs."

They were a little knot of men, and, the window being mentioned, went out in the road to look up at it. This occasioned their observing that the house was still close shut, as the house-keeper had said she had left it on the previous night, and led to a great many suggestions: which terminated in two or three of the boldest getting round to the back and so entering by a window, while the others remained outside, in impatient expectation.

They looked into all the rooms below: opening the shutters as they went, to admit the fading light: and still finding nobody, and everything quiet and in its place, doubted whether they should go farther. One man, however, remarking that they had not yet been into the garret, and that it was there he had been last seen, they agreed to look there too, and went up softly; for the mystery and silence made them timid.

After they had stood, for an instant, on the landing, eying each other, he who had proposed their carrying the search so far, turned the handle of the door, and, pushing it open, looked through the chink, and fell back directly.

"It's very odd," he whispered, "he's hiding behind the door! Look!"

They pressed forward to see; but one among them thrusting the others aside with a loud exclamation, drew a clasp-knife from his pocket and dashing into the room cut down the body.

He had torn a rope from one of the old trunks, and hung himself on an iron hook immediately below the trap-door in the ceiling — in the very place to which the eyes of his son, a lonely, desolate, little creature, had so often been directed in childish terror, fourteen years before.

CHAPTER LXIII.

THE BROTHERS CHEERYBLE MAKE VARIOUS DECLARATIONS FOR THEMSELVES AND OTHERS. TIM LINKINWATER MAKES A DECLARATION FOR HIMSELF.

Some weeks had passed, and the first shock of these events had subsided. Madeline had been removed; Frank had been absent; and Nicholas and Kate had begun to try in good earnest to stifle their own regrets, and to live for each other and for their mother — who, poor lady, could in no wise be reconciled to this dull and altered state of affairs — when there came one evening, per favor of Mr. Linkinwater, an invitation from the Brothers, to dinner on the next day but one: comprehending, not only Mrs. Nickleby, Kate, and Nicholas, but little Miss La Creevy, who was most particularly mentioned.

"Now, my dears," said Mrs. Nickleby, when they had rendered becoming honor to the bidding, and Tim had taken his departure, "what does *this* mean?"

"What do *you* mean, mother?" asked Nicholas, smiling.

"I say, my dear," rejoined that lady, with a face of unfathomable mystery, "what does this invitation to dinner mean, — what is its intention and object?"

"I conclude it means, that on such a day, we are to

eat and drink in their house, and that its intent and object is to confer pleasure upon us," said Nicholas.

"And that's all you conclude it is, my dear?"

"I have not yet arrived at anything deeper, mother."

"Then I'll just tell you one thing," said Mrs. Nickleby, "you'll find yourself a little surprised; that's all. You may depend upon it that this means something besides dinner."

"Tea and supper, perhaps," suggested Nicholas.

"I wouldn't be absurd, my dear, if I were you," replied Mrs. Nickleby, in a lofty manner, "because it's not by any means becoming, and doesn't suit you at all. What I mean to say is, that the Mr. Cheerybles don't ask us to dinner with all this ceremony, for nothing. Never mind; wait and see. You won't believe anything I say, of course. It's much better to wait; a great deal better; it's satisfactory to all parties, and there can be no disputing. All I say is, remember what I say now, and when I say I said so, don't say I didn't."

With this stipulation, Mrs. Nickleby, who was troubled, night and day, with a vision of a hot messenger tearing up to the door to announce that Nicholas had been taken into partnership, quitted that branch of the subject, and entered upon a new one.

"It's a very extraordinary thing," she said, "a most extraordinary thing, that they should have invited Miss La Creevy. It quite astonishes me, upon my word it does. Of course it's very pleasant that she should be invited, very pleasant, and I have no doubt that she'll conduct herself extremely well; she always does. It's very gratifying to think that we should have been the means of introducing her into such society, and I'm quite

glad of it — quite rejoiced — for she certainly is an exceedingly well-behaved and good-natured little person. I could wish that some friend would mention to her how very badly she has her cap trimmed, and what very preposterous bows those are, but of course that's impossible, and if she likes to make a fright of herself, no doubt she has a perfect right to do so. We never see ourselves — never do, and never did — and I suppose we never shall."

This moral reflection reminding her of the necessity of being peculiarly smart on the occasion, so as to counterbalance Miss La Creevy, and be herself an effectual set-off and atonement, led Mrs. Nickleby into a consultation with her daughter relative to certain ribbons, gloves, and trimmings: which, being a complicated question, and one of paramount importance, soon routed the previous one, and put it to flight.

The great day arriving, the good lady put herself under Kate's hands an hour or so after breakfast, and, dressing by easy stages, completed her toilet in sufficient time to allow of her daughter's making hers, which was very simple and not very long, though so satisfactory that she never had appeared more charming or looked more lovely. Miss La Creevy, too, arrived with two bandboxes (whereof the bottoms fell out, as they were handed from the coach) and something in a newspaper, which a gentleman had sat upon, coming down, and which was obliged to be ironed again, before it was fit for service. At last, everybody was dressed, including Nicholas who had come home to fetch them, and they went away in a coach sent by the Brothers for the purpose: Mrs. Nickleby wondering very much what they would have for dinner, and cross-examining Nicholas as

to the extent of his discoveries in the morning; whether he had smelt anything cooking, at all like turtle, and if not, what he had smelt; and diversifying the conversation with reminiscences of dinners to which she had gone some twenty years ago, concerning which she particularized, not only the dishes but the guests, in whom her hearers did not feel a very absorbing interest, as not one of them had ever chanced to hear their names before.

The old butler received them with profound respect and many smiles, and ushered them into the drawing-room, where they were received by the Brothers with so much cordiality and kindness that Mrs. Nickleby was quite in a flutter, and had scarcely presence of mind enough, even to patronize Miss La Creevy. Kate was still more affected by the reception: for, knowing that the Brothers were acquainted with all that had passed between her and Frank, she felt her position a most delicate and trying one, and was trembling on the arm of Nicholas, when Mr. Charles took her in his, and led her to another part of the room.

"Have you seen Madeline, my dear," he said, "since she left your house?"

"No, sir!" replied Kate. "Not once."

"And not heard from her, eh? Not heard from her?"

"I have only had one letter," rejoined Kate, gently. "I thought she would not have forgotten me, quite so soon."

"Ah!" said the old man, patting her on the head, and speaking as affectionately as if she had been his favorite child. "Poor dear! what do you think of this, brother Ned? Madeline has only written to her once — only

once, Ned, and she didn't think she would have forgotten her quite so soon, Ned."

"Oh! sad, sad — very sad!" said Ned.

The Brothers interchanged a glance, and looking at Kate for a little time without speaking, shook hands, and nodded as if they were congratulating each other on something very delightful.

"Well, well," said brother Charles, "go into that room, my dear — that door yonder — and see if there's not a letter for you from her. I think there's one upon the table. You needn't hurry back, my love, if there is, for we don't dine just yet, and there's plenty of time — plenty of time."

Kate retired as she was directed. Brother Charles, having followed her graceful figure with his eyes, turned to Mrs. Nickleby, and said, —

"We took the liberty of naming one hour before the real dinner-time, ma'am, because we had a little business to speak about, which would occupy the interval. Ned, my dear fellow, will you mention what we agreed upon? Mr. Nickleby, sir, have the goodness to follow me."

Without any further explanation, Mrs. Nickleby, Miss La Creevy, and brother Ned, were left alone together, and Nicholas followed brother Charles into his private room; where, to his great astonishment, he encountered Frank, whom he supposed to be abroad.

"Young men," said Mr. Cheeryble, "shake hands!"

"I need no bidding to do that," said Nicholas, extending his.

"Nor I," rejoined Frank, as he clasped it heartily.

The old gentleman thought that two handsomer or finer young fellows could scarcely stand side by side than those on whom he looked with so much pleasure.

Suffering his eyes to rest upon them, for a short time, in silence, he said, while he seated himself at his desk.

"I wish to see you friends — close and firm friends — and if I thought you otherwise, I should hesitate in what I am about to say. Frank, look here! Mr. Nickleby, will come on the other side?"

The young men stepped up on either hand of brother Charles, who produced a paper from his desk, and unfolded it.

"This," he said, "is a copy of the will of Madeline's maternal grandfather, bequeathing her the sum of twelve thousand pounds, payable either upon her coming of age or marrying. It would appear that this gentleman, angry with her (his only relation) because she would not put herself under his protection, and detach herself from the society of her father, in compliance with his repeated overtures, made a will leaving this property (which was all he possessed) to a charitable institution. He would seem to have repented this determination, however, for three weeks afterwards, and in the same month, he executed this. By some fraud, it was abstracted immediately after his decease, and the other — the only will found — was proved and administered. Friendly negotiations, which have only just now terminated, have been proceeding since this instrument came into our hands, and, as there is no doubt of its authenticity, and the witnesses have been discovered (after some trouble), the money has been refunded. Madeline has therefore obtained her right, and is, or will be, when either of the contingencies which I have mentioned has arisen, mistress of this fortune. You understand me?"

Frank replied in the affirmative. Nicholas, who could

not trust himself to speak lest his voice should be heard to falter, bowed his head.

"Now, Frank," said the old gentleman, "you were the immediate means of recovering this deed. The fortune is but a small one; but we love Madeline; and such as it is, we would rather see you allied to her with that, than to any other girl we know who has three times the money. Will you become a suitor to her for her hand?"

"No, sir. I interested myself in the recovery of that instrument, believing that her hand was already pledged to one who has a thousand times the claims upon her gratitude, and, if I mistake not, upon her heart, that I or any other man can ever urge. In this it seems I judged hastily."

"As you always do, sir," cried brother Charles, utterly forgetting his assumed dignity, "as you always do. How dare you think, Frank, that we would have you marry for money, when youth, beauty, and every amiable virtue and excellence, were to be had for love? How dared you, Frank, go and make love to Mr. Nickleby's sister without telling us first, what you meant to do, and letting us speak for you?"

"I hardly dared to hope" ——

"You hardly dared to hope! Then, so much the greater reason for having our assistance! Mr. Nickleby, sir, Frank, although he judged hastily, judged, for once, correctly. Madeline's heart *is* occupied — give me your hand, sir; it is occupied by you, and worthily and naturally. This fortune is destined to be yours, but you have a greater fortune in her, sir, than you would have in money were it forty times told. She chooses you, Mr. Nickleby. She chooses as we, her dearest friends, would have her

choose. Frank chooses as we would have *him* choose. He should have your sister's little hand, sir, if she had refused it a score of times — aye, he should, and he shall! You acted nobly, not knowing our sentiments, but now you know them, sir, you must do as you are bid. What! You are the children of a worthy gentleman! The time was, sir, when my dear brother Ned and I were two poor simple-hearted boys, wandering, almost barefoot, to seek our fortunes; are we changed in anything but years and worldly circumstances since that time? No, God forbid! Oh, Ned, Ned, Ned, what a happy day this is for you and me! If our poor mother had only lived to see us now, Ned, how proud it would have made her dear heart at last!"

Thus apostrophized, brother Ned who had entered with Mrs. Nickleby, and who had been before unobserved by the young men, darted forward, and fairly hugged brother Charles in his arms.

"Bring in my little Kate," said the latter, after a short silence. "Bring her in, Ned. Let me see Kate, let me kiss her. I have a right to do so now; I was very near it when she first came; I have often been very near it. Ah! Did you find the letter, my bird? Did you find Madeline herself, waiting for you and expecting you? Did you find that she had not quite forgotten her friend and nurse and sweet companion? Why, this is almost the best of all!"

"Come, come," said Ned, "Frank will be jealous, and we shall have some cutting of throats before dinner."

"Then let him take her away, Ned, let him take her away. Madeline's in the next room. Let all the lovers get out of the way, and talk among themselves, if they've anything to say. Turn 'em out, Ned, every one!"

Brother Charles began the clearance by leading the blushing girl to the door, and dismissing her with a kiss. Frank was not very slow to follow, and Nicholas had disappeared first of all. So there only remained Mrs. Nickleby and Miss La Creevy, who were both sobbing heartily; the two brothers; and Tim Linkinwater, who now came in to shake hands with everybody: his round face all radiant and beaming with smiles.

"Well, Tim Linkinwater, sir," said brother Charles, who was always spokesman, "now the young folks are happy, sir."

"You didn't keep 'em in suspense as long as you said you would, though," returned Tim, archly. "Why, Mr. Nickleby and Mr. Frank were to have been in your room for I don't know how long; and I don't know what you weren't to have told them before you came out with the truth."

"Now, did you ever know such a villain as this, Ned?" said the old gentleman, "did you ever know such a villain as Tim Linkinwater? He accusing me of being impatient, and he the very man who has been wearying us morning, noon, and night, and torturing us for leave to go and tell 'em what was in store, before our plans were half complete, or we had arranged a single thing — a treacherous dog!"

"So he is, brother Charles," returned Ned, "Tim is a treacherous dog. Tim is not to be trusted. Tim is a wild young fellow — he wants gravity and steadiness; he must sow his wild oats, and then perhaps he'll become in time a respectable member of society."

This being one of the standing jokes between the old fellows and Tim, they all three laughed very heartily, and

might have laughed much longer, but that the Brothers seeing that Mrs. Nickleby was laboring to express her feelings, and was really overwhelmed by the happiness of the time, took her between them, and led her from the room under pretence of having to consult her on some most important arrangements.

Now, Tim and Miss La Creevy had met very often, and had always been very chatty and pleasant together — had always been great friends — and consequently it was the most natural thing in the world that Tim, finding that she still sobbed, should endeavor to console her. As Miss La Creevy sat on a large old-fashioned window-seat, where there was ample room for two, it was also natural that Tim should sit down beside her; and as to Tim's being unusually spruce and particular in his attire, that day, why it was a high festival and a great occasion, and that was the most natural thing of all.

Tim sat down beside Miss La Creevy, and, crossing one leg over the other so that his foot — he had very comely feet, and happened to be wearing the neatest shoes and black silk stockings possible — should come easily within the range of her eye, said in a soothing way:

"Don't cry!"

"I must," rejoined Miss La Creevy.

"No, don't," said Tim. "Please don't; pray don't."

"I am so happy!" sobbed the little woman.

"Then laugh," said Tim, "do laugh."

What in the world Tim was doing with his arm, it is impossible to conjecture, but he knocked his elbow against that part of the window which was quite on the other side of Miss La Creevy; and it is clear that it could have no business there.

"Do laugh," said Tim, "or I'll cry."

"Why should you cry?" asked Miss La Creevy, smiling.

"Because I'm happy too," said Tim. "We are both happy, and I should like to do as you do."

Surely, there never was a man who fidgeted as Tim must have done then; for he knocked the window again — almost in the same place — and Miss La Creevy said she was sure he'd break it.

"I knew," said Tim, "that you would be pleased with this scene."

"It was very thoughtful and kind to remember me," returned Miss La Creevy. "Nothing could have delighted me, half so much."

Why on earth should Miss La Creevy and Tim Linkinwater have said all this in a whisper? It was no secret. And why should Tim Linkinwater have looked so hard at Miss La Creevy, and why should Miss La Creevy have looked so hard at the ground?

"It's a pleasant thing," said Tim, "to people like us, who have passed all our lives in the world, alone, to see young folks that we are fond of, brought together with so many years of happiness before them."

"Ah!" cried the little woman with all her heart, "that it is!"

"Although," pursued Tim — "although it makes one feel quite solitary and cast away — now don't it?"

Miss La Creevy said she didn't know. And why should she say she didn't know? Because she must have known whether it did or not.

"It's almost enough to make us get married after all, isn't it?" said Tim.

"Oh nonsense!" replied Miss La Creevy, laughing, "we are too old."

"Not a bit," said Tim, "we are too old to be single — why shouldn't we both be married, instead of sitting through the long winter evenings by our solitary firesides? Why shouldn't we make one fireside of it, and marry each other?"

"Oh Mr. Linkinwater, you're joking!"

"No, no, I'm not. I'm not indeed," said Tim. "I will, if you will. Do, my dear!"

"It would make people laugh so."

"Let 'em laugh," cried Tim, stoutly, "we have good tempers I know, and we'll laugh too. Why, what hearty laughs we have had since we've known each other."

"So we have," cried Miss La Creevy — giving way a little, as Tim thought.

"It has been the happiest time in all my life — at least, away from the counting-house and Cheeryble Brothers," said Tim. "Do, my dear! Now say you will."

"No, no, we mustn't think of it," returned Miss La Creevy. "What would the Brothers say?"

"Why, God bless your soul!" cried Tim, innocently, "you don't suppose I should think of such a thing without their knowing it! Why they left us here on purpose."

"I can never look 'em in the face again!" exclaimed Miss La Creevy, faintly.

"Come!" said Tim, "let's be a comfortable couple. We shall live in the old house here, where I have been for four-and-forty year; we shall go to the old church, where I've been, every Sunday morning, all through that time; we shall have all my old friends about us — Dick, the archway, the pump, the flower-pots, and Mr. Frank's children, and Mr. Nickleby's children, that we shall seem

like grandfather and grandmother to. Let's be a comfortable couple, and take care of each other! And if we should get deaf, or lame, or blind, or bedridden, how glad we shall be that we have somebody we are fond of, always to talk to and sit with! Let's be a comfortable couple. Now, do, my dear!"

Five minutes after this honest and straightforward speech, little Miss La Creevy and Tim were talking as pleasantly as if they had been married for a score of years, and had never once quarrelled all the time; and five minutes after that, when Miss La Creevy had bustled out to see if her eyes were red and put her hair to rights, Tim moved with a stately step towards the drawing-room, exclaiming as he went, "There a'n't such another woman in all London — I *know* there a'n't!"

By this time, the apoplectic butler was nearly in fits, in consequence of the unheard-of postponement of dinner. Nicholas, who had been engaged in a manner which every reader may imagine for himself or herself, was hurrying down-stairs in obedience to his angry summons, when he encountered a new surprise.

On his way down, he overtook, in one of the passages, a stranger genteelly dressed in black, who was also moving towards the dining-room. As he was rather lame, and walked slowly, Nicholas lingered behind, and was following him step by step, wondering who he was, when he suddenly turned round and caught him by both hands.

"Newman Noggs!" cried Nicholas, joyfully.

"Ah! Newman, your own Newman, your own old faithful Newman! My dear boy, my dear Nick, I give you joy — health, happiness, every blessing. I can't bear it — it's too much, my dear boy — it makes a child of me!"

"Where have you been?" said Nicholas, "what have you been doing? How often have I inquired for you, and been told that I should hear before long!"

"I know, I know!" returned Newman. "They wanted all the happiness to come together. I've been helping 'em. I — I — look at me, Nick, look at me!"

"You would never let *me* do that," said Nicholas in a tone of gentle reproach.

"I didn't mind what I was, then. I shouldn't have had the heart to put on gentleman's clothes. They would have reminded me of old times and made me miserable. I am another man now, Nick. My dear boy, I can't speak — don't say anything to me — don't think the worse of me for these tears — you don't know what I feel to-day; you can't, and never will!"

They walked in to dinner, arm-in-arm, and sat down, side by side.

Never was such a dinner as that, since the world began. There was the superannuated bank-clerk, Tim Linkinwater's friend; and there was the chubby old lady, Tim Linkinwater's sister; and there was so much attention from Tim Linkinwater's sister to Miss La Creevy, and there were so many jokes from the superannuated bank-clerk, and Tim Linkinwater himself was in such tip-top spirits, and little Miss La Creevy was in such a comical state, that of themselves they would have composed the pleasantest party conceivable. Then, there was Mrs. Nickleby, so grand and complacent; Madeline and Kate, so blushing and beautiful; Nicholas and Frank, so devoted and proud; and all four so silently and tremblingly happy — there was Newman so subdued yet so overjoyed, and there were the twin Brothers so delighted and interchanging such looks,

that the old servant stood transfixed behind his master's chair, and felt his eyes grow dim as they wandered round the table.

When first the novelty of the meeting had worn off, and they began truly to feel how happy they were, the conversation became more general, and the harmony and pleasure if possible increased. The Brothers were in a perfect ecstasy; and their insisting on saluting the ladies, all round, before they would permit them to retire, gave occasion to the superannuated bank-clerk to say so many good things, that he quite outshone himself, and was looked upon as a prodigy of humor.

"Kate, my dear," said Mrs. Nickleby, taking her daughter aside, directly they got up-stairs, "you don't really mean to tell me that this is actually true about Miss La Creevy and Mr. Linkinwater?"

"Indeed it is, mamma."

"Why, I never heard such a thing in my life!" exclaimed Mrs. Nickleby.

"Mr. Linkinwater is a most excellent creature," reasoned Kate, "and, for his age, quite young still."

"For *his* age, my dear!" returned Mrs. Nickleby, "yes; nobody says anything against him, except that I think he is the weakest and most foolish man I ever knew. It's *her* age I speak of. That he should have gone and offered himself to a woman who must be — ah, half as old again as I am — and that she should have dared to accept him! It don't signify, Kate; — I'm disgusted with her!"

Shaking her head very emphatically indeed, Mrs. Nickleby swept away; and all the evening, in the midst of the merriment and enjoyment that ensued, and in which with that exception she freely participated, con-

ducted herself towards Miss La Creevy in a stately and distant manner, designed to mark her sense of the impropriety of her conduct, and to signify her extreme and cutting disapprobation of the misdemeanor she had so flagrantly committed.

CHAPTER LXIV.

AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE IS RECOGNIZED UNDER MELANCHOLY CIRCUMSTANCES, AND DOTHEBOYS HALL BREAKS UP FOREVER.

NICHOLAS was one of those whose joy is incomplete unless it is shared by the friends of adverse and less fortunate days. Surrounded by every fascination of love and hope, his warm heart yearned towards plain John Browdie. He remembered their first meeting with a smile, and their second with a tear; saw poor Smike once again with the bundle on his shoulder trudging patiently by his side; and heard the honest Yorkshireman's rough words of encouragement as he left them on their road to London.

Madeline and he sat down, very many times, jointly to produce a letter which should acquaint John at full length with his altered fortunes, and assure him of his friendship and gratitude. It so happened, however, that the letter could never be written. Although they applied themselves to it with the best intentions in the world, it chanced that they always fell to talking about something else, and when Nicholas tried it by himself, he found it impossible to write one half of what he wished to say, or to pen anything, indeed, which on reperusal did not appear cold and unsatisfactory compared with what he had in his mind. At last, after going on

thus from day to day, and reproaching himself more and more, he resolved (the more readily as Madeline strongly urged him) to make a hasty trip into Yorkshire, and present himself before Mr. and Mrs. Browdie without a word of notice.

Thus it was that between seven and eight o'clock one evening, he and Kate found themselves in the Saracen's Head booking-office, securing a place to Greta Bridge by the next morning's coach. They had to go westward, to procure some little necessaries for his journey, and, as it was a fine night, they agreed to walk there, and ride home.

The place they had just been in, called up so many recollections, and Kate had so many anecdotes of Madeline, and Nicholas so many anecdotes of Frank, and each was so interested in what the other said, and both were so happy and confiding, and had so much to talk about, that it was not until they had plunged for a full half hour into that labyrinth of streets which lies between Seven Dials and Soho, without emerging into any large thoroughfare, that Nicholas began to think it just possible they might have lost their way.

The possibility was soon converted into a certainty; for, on looking about, and walking first to one end of the street and then to the other, he could find no landmark he could recognize, and was fain to turn back again in quest of some place at which he could seek a direction.

It was a by-street, and there was nobody about, or in the few wretched shops they passed. Making towards a faint gleam of light, which streamed across the pavement from a cellar, Nicholas was about to descend two or three steps so as to render himself visible to those below and make his inquiry, when he was arrested by a loud noise of scolding in a woman's voice.

"Oh come away!" said Kate, "they are quarrelling. You'll be hurt."

"Wait one instant, Kate. Let us hear if there's anything the matter," returned her brother. "Hush!"

"You nasty, idle, vicious, good-for-nothing brute," cried the woman, stamping on the ground, "why don't you turn the mangle?"

"So I am, my life and soul!" replied a man's voice. "I am always turning. I am perpetually turning, like a demd old horse in a demnition mill. My life is one demd horrid grind!"

"Then why don't you go and 'list for a soldier?" retorted the woman, "you're welcome to."

"For a soldier!" cried the man. "For a soldier! Would his joy and gladness see him in a coarse red coat with a little tail? Would she hear of his being slapped and beat by drummers demnebly? Would she have him fire off real guns, and have his hair cut, and his whiskers shaved, and his eyes turned right and left, and his trousers pipe-clayed?"

"Dear Nicholas," whispered Kate, "you don't know who that is. It's Mr. Mantalini I am confident."

"Do make sure! Peep at him while I ask the way," said Nicholas. "Come down a step or two — come!"

Drawing her after him, Nicholas crept down the steps and looked into a small boarded cellar. There, amidst clothes-baskets and clothes, stripped to his shirt-sleeves, but wearing still an old patched pair of pantaloons of superlative make, a once brilliant waistcoat, and mustache and whiskers as of yore, but lacking their lustrous dye — there, endeavoring to mollify the wrath of a buxom female — not the lawful Madame Mantalini, but the proprietress of the concern — and grinding mean-

while as if for very life at the mangle, whose creaking noise, mingled with her shrill tones, appeared almost to deafen him — there was the graceful, elegant, fascinating, and once dashing Mantalini.

"Oh you false traitor!" cried the lady, threatening personal violence on Mr. Mantalini's face.

"False. Oh dem! Now my soul, my gentle, captivating, bewitching, and most demnebly enslaving chick-a-biddy, be calm," said Mr. Mantalini, humbly.

"I won't!" screamed the woman. "I'll tear your eyes out!"

"Oh! What a demd savage lamb!" cried Mr. Mantalini.

"You're never to be trusted," screamed the woman, "you were out all day yesterday, and gallivanting somewhere I know — you know you were! Isn't it enough that I paid two pound fourteen for you, and took you out of prison and let you live here like a gentleman, but must you go on like this: breaking my heart besides?"

"I will never break its heart, I will be a good boy, and never do so any more; I will never be naughty again; I beg its little pardon," said Mr. Mantalini, dropping the handle of the mangle, and folding his palms together, "it is all up with its handsome friend! He has gone to the demnition bow-wows. It will have pity? it will not scratch and claw, but pet and comfort? Oh, demmit."

Very little affected, to judge from her action, by this tender appeal, the lady was on the point of returning some angry reply, when Nicholas, raising his voice, asked his way to Piccadilly.

Mr. Mantalini turned round, caught sight of Kate, and, without another word, leapt at one bound into a

bed which stood behind the door, and drew the counterpane over his face: kicking meanwhile convulsively.

"Demmit," he cried, in a suffocating voice, "it's little Nickleby! Shut the door, put out the candle, turn me up in the bedstead! Oh, dem, dem, dem!"

The woman looked, first at Nicholas, and then at Mr. Mantalini, as if uncertain on whom to visit this extraordinary behavior; but Mr. Mantalini happening by ill-luck to thrust his nose from under the bedclothes, in his anxiety to ascertain whether the visitors were gone, she suddenly, and with a dexterity which could only have been acquired by long practice, flung a pretty heavy clothes-basket at him, with so good an aim that he kicked more violently than before, though without venturing tc make any effort to disengage his head, which was quite extinguished. Thinking this a favorable opportunity for departing before any of the torrent of her wrath discharged itself upon him, Nicholas hurried Kate off, and left the unfortunate subject of this unexpected recognition to explain his conduct as he best could.

The next morning he began his journey. It was now cold, winter weather: forcibly recalling to his mind under what circumstances he had first travelled that road, and how many vicissitudes and changes he had since undergone. He was alone inside, the greater part of the way, and sometimes, when he had fallen into a doze, and, rousing himself, looked out of the window, and recognized some place which he well remembered as having passed, either on his journey down, or in the long walk back with poor Smike, he could hardly believe but that all which had since happened had been a dream, and that they were still plodding wearily on towards London, with the world before them.

To render these recollections the more vivid, it came on to snow as night set in; and, passing through Stamford and Grantham, and by the little ale-house where he had heard the story of the bold Baron of Grogzwig, everything looked as if he had seen it but yesterday, and not even a flake of the white crust on the roofs had melted away. Encouraging the train of ideas which flocked upon him, he could almost persuade himself that he sat again outside the coach, with Squeers and the boys; that he heard their voices in the air; and that he felt again, but with a mingled sensation of pain and pleasure now, that old sinking of the heart, and longing after home. While he was yet yielding himself up to these fancies he fell asleep, and, dreaming of Madeline, forgot them.

He slept at the inn at Greta Bridge, on the night of his arrival, and, rising at a very early hour next morning, walked to the market-town, and inquired for John Browdie's house. John lived in the outskirts, now he was a family man; and, as everybody knew him, Nicholas had no difficulty in finding a boy who undertook to guide him to his residence.

Dismissing his guide at the gate, and in his impatience not even stopping to admire the thriving look of cottage or garden either, Nicholas made his way to the kitchen-door, and knocked lustily with his stick.

"Halloa!" cried a voice inside, "waat be the matther noo? Be the toon afire? Ding, but thou mak'est noise eneaf!"

With these words, John Browdie opened the door himself, and opening his eyes to their utmost width, cried, as he clapped his hands together, and burst into a hearty roar:

"Ecod, it be the godfeyther, it be the godfeyther! Tilly, here be Misther Nickleby. Gi' us thee hond, mun. Coom awa', coom awa'. In wi' 'un, doon beside the fire; tak' a soop o' thot. Dinnot say a word till thou'st droonk it a'! Oop wi' it, mun. Ding! but I'm reeght glod to see thee."

Adapting his action to his text, John dragged Nicholas into the kitchen, forced him down upon a huge settle beside a blazing fire, poured out from an enormous bottle about a quarter of a pint of spirits, thrust it into his hand, opened his mouth and threw back his head as a sign to him to drink it instantly, and stood with a broad grin of welcome overspreading his great red face, like a jolly giant.

"I might ha' knowa'd," said John, "that nobody but thou would ha' coom wi' sike a knock as yon. Thot was the wa' thou knocked at school-measther's door, eh? Ha, ha, ha! But I say — waat be a' this aboot school-measther?"

"You know it then?" said Nicholas.

"They were talking aboot it, doon toon, last neeght," replied John, "but neane on 'em seemed quite to un'erstan' it loike."

"After various shiftings and delays," said Nicholas, "he has been sentenced to be transported for seven years, for being in the unlawful possession of a stolen will; and, after that, he has to suffer the consequence of a conspiracy."

"Whew!" cried John, "a conspiracy! Soomat in the pooder plot wa' — eh? Soomat in the Guy Faurx line?"

"No, no, no, a conspiracy connected with his school; I'll explain it presently."

"Thot's reeght!" said John, "explain it arter breakfast, not noo, for thou bee'st hoongry, and so am I; and Tilly she mun' be at the bottom o' a' explanations, for she says thot's the mutual confidence. Ha, ha, ha! Ecod it's a room start, is the mutual confidence!"

The entrance of Mrs. Browdie, with a smart cap on and very many apologies for their having been detected in the act of breakfasting in the kitchen, stopped John in his discussion of this grave subject, and hastened the breakfast: which, being composed of vast mounds of toast, new-laid eggs, boiled ham, Yorkshire pie, and other cold substantials (of which heavy relays were constantly appearing from another kitchen under the direction of a very plump servant), was admirably adapted to the cold bleak morning, and received the utmost justice from all parties. At last, it came to a close; and the fire which had been lighted in the best parlor having by this time burnt up, they adjourned thither, to hear what Nicholas had to tell.

Nicholas told them all, and never was there a story which awakened so many emotions in the breasts of two eager listeners. At one time, honest John groaned in sympathy, and at another roared with joy; at one time he vowed to go up to London on purpose to get a sight of the Brothers Cheeryble; and, at another, swore that Tim Linkinwater should receive such a ham by coach, and carriage free, as mortal knife had never carved. When Nicholas began to describe Madeline, he sat with his mouth wide open, nudging Mrs. Browdie from time to time, and exclaiming under his breath that she must be "raa'ther a tidy sart," and when he heard at last that his young friend had come down, purposely to communicate his good fortune, and to convey to him all those as-

surances of friendship which he could not state with sufficient warmth in writing — that the only object of his journey was to share his happiness with them, and to tell them that when he was married they must come up to see him, and that Madeline insisted on it as well as he — John could hold out no longer, but after looking indignantly at his wife, and demanding to know what she was whimpering for, drew his coat-sleeve over his eyes and blubbered outright.

"Tell 'ee waat though," said John seriously, when a great deal had been said on both sides, "to return to school-measther. If this news aboot 'un has reached school to-day, the old 'ooman wean't have a whole boan in her boddy, nor Fanny neither."

"Oh John!" cried Mrs. Browdie.

"Ah! and Oh John agean," replied the Yorkshireman. "I dinnot know what they lads mightn't do. When it first got aboot that school-measther was in trouble, some feythers and moothers sent and took their young chaps awa'. If them as is left should know waat's coom tiv'un, there'll be sike a revolution and rebel! — Ding! But I think they'll a' gang daft, and spill bluid like wather!"

In fact John Browdie's apprehensions were so strong that he determined to ride over to the school without delay, and invited Nicholas to accompany him, which, however, he declined, pleading that his presence might perhaps aggravate the bitterness of their adversity.

"Thot's true!" said John, "I should ne'er ha' thought o' thot."

"I must return to-morrow," said Nicholas, "but I mean to dine with you to-day, and if Mrs. Browdie can give me a bed" ——

"Bed!" cried John, "I wish thou couldst sleep in

fower beds at once. Ecod thou should'st have 'em a'. Bide till I coom back, on'y bide till I coom back, and ecod we'll make a day of it."

Giving his wife a hearty kiss, and Nicholas a no less hearty shake of the hand, John mounted his horse and rode off: leaving Mrs. Browdie to apply herself to hospitable preparations, and his young friend to stroll about the neighborhood, and revisit spots which were rendered familiar to him by many a miserable association.

John cantered away, and arriving at Dotheboys Hall, tied his horse to a gate and made his way to the schoolroom door, which he found locked on the inside. A tremendous noise and riot arose from within, and, applying his eye to a convenient crevice in the wall, he did not remain long in ignorance of its meaning.

The news of Mr. Squeers's downfall had reached Dotheboys; that was quite clear. To all appearance, it had very recently become known to the young gentlemen; for the rebellion had just broken out.

It was one of the brimstone-and-treacle mornings, and Mrs. Squeers had entered school according to custom with the large bowl and spoon, followed by Miss Squeers and the amiable Wackford: who, during his father's absence, had taken upon him such minor branches of the executive as kicking the pupils with his nailed boots, pulling the hair of some of the smaller boys, pinching the others in aggravating places, and rendering himself, in various similar ways, a great comfort and happiness to his mother. Their entrance, whether by premeditation or a simultaneous impulse, was the signal of revolt. While one detachment rushed to the door and locked it, and another mounted on the desks and forms, the stoutest (and consequently the newest) boy seized the cane, and

confronting Mrs. Squeers with a stern countenance, snatched off her cap and beaver-bonnet, put it on his own head, armed himself with the wooden spoon, and bade her, on pain of death, go down upon her knees and take a dose directly. Before that estimable lady could recover herself, or offer the slightest retaliation, she was forced into a kneeling posture by a crowd of shouting tormentors, and compelled to swallow a spoonful of the odious mixture, rendered more than usually savory by the immersion in the bowl of Master Wackford's head, whose ducking was intrusted to another rebel. The success of this first achievement prompted the malicious crowd, whose faces were clustered together in every variety of lank and half-starved ugliness, to further acts of outrage. The leader was insisting upon Mrs. Squeers repeating her dose, Master Squeers was undergoing another dip in the treacle, and a violent assault had been commenced on Miss Squeers, when John Browdie, bursting open the door with a vigorous kick, rushed to the rescue. The shouts, screams, groans, hoots, and clapping of hands, suddenly ceased, and a dead silence ensued.

"Ye be noice chaps," said John, looking steadily round. "What's to do here, thou yoong dogs!"

"Squeers is in prison, and we are going to run away!" cried a score of shrill voices. "We won't stop, we won't stop!"

"Weel then, dinnot stop," replied John, "who waants thee to stop? Roon awa' loike men, but dinnot hurt the women."

"Hurrah!" cried the shrill voices, more shrilly still.

"Hurrah?" repeated John. "Weel, hurrah loike men too. Noo then, look out. Hip — hip — hip — hurrah!"

"Hurrah!" cried the voices.

"Hurrah! agean," said John. "Looder still."

The boys obeyed.

"Anoother!" said John. "Dinnot be afeared on it. Let's have a good 'un!"

"Hurrah!"

"Noo then," said John, "let's have yan more to end wi', and then coot off as quick as you loike. Tak' a good breath noo — Squeers be in jail — the school's brokken oop — it's a' ower — past and gane — think o' thot, and let it be a hearty 'un! Hurrah!"

Such a cheer arose as the walls of Dotheboys Hall had never echoed before, and were destined never to respond to again. When the sound had died away, the school was empty; and of the busy noisy crowd which had peopled it but five minutes before, not one remained.

"Very well, Mr. Browdie!" said Miss Squeers, hot and flushed from the recent encounter, but vixenish to the last; "you've been and excited our boys to run away. Now see if we don't pay you out for that, sir! If my pa *is* unfortunate and trod down by henemies, we're not going to be basely crowed and conquered over by you and 'Tilda."

"Noa!" replied John bluntly, "thou bean't. Tak' thy oath o' thot. Think betther o' us, Fanny. I tell 'ee both, that I'm glod the auld man has been caught out at last — dom'd glod — but ye'll sooffer eneaf wi'out any crowin' fra' me, and I be not the mun to crow, nor be Tilly the lass, so I tell 'ee flat. More than thot, I tell 'ee noo, that if thou need'st friends to help thee awa' from this place — dinnot turn up thy nose, Fanny, thou may'st — thou'lt foind Tilly and I wi' a thout o' old

times aboot us, ready to lend thee a hond. And when I say thot, dinnot think I be asheamed of waat I've deane, for I say agean, Hurrah! and dom' the school-measther — there!"

His parting words concluded, John Browdie strode heavily out, remounted his nag, put him once more into a smart canter, and, carolling lustily forth some fragments of an old song, to which the horse's hoofs rang a merry accompaniment, sped back to his pretty wife and to Nicholas.

For some days afterwards, the neighboring country was overrun with boys, who, the report went, had been secretly furnished by Mr. and Mrs. Browdie, not only with a hearty meal of bread and meat, but with sundry shillings and sixpences to help them on their way. To this rumor John always returned a stout denial, which he accompanied, however, with a lurking grin, that rendered the suspicious doubtful, and fully confirmed all previous believers.

There were a few timid young children, who, miserable as they had been, and many as were the tears they had shed in the wretched school, still knew no other home, and had formed for it a sort of attachment, which made them weep when the bolder spirits fled, and cling to it as a refuge. Of these, some were found crying under hedges and in such places, frightened at the solitude. One had a dead bird in a little cage; he had wandered nearly twenty miles, and when his poor favorite died, lost courage, and lay down beside him. Another was discovered in a yard hard by the school, sleeping with a dog, who bit at those who came to remove him, and licked the sleeping child's pale face.

They were taken back, and some other stragglers

were recovered, but by degrees they were claimed, or lost again; and, in course of time, Dotheboys Hall and its last breaking up began to be forgotten by the neighbors, or to be only spoken of, as among the things that had been.

CHAPTER LXV.

CONCLUSION.

When her term of mourning had expired, Madeline gave her hand and fortune to Nicholas; and, on the same day and at the same time, Kate became Mrs. Frank Cheeryble. It was expected that Tim Linkinwater and Miss La Creevy would have made a third couple on the occasion, but they declined, and two or three weeks afterwards went out together one morning before breakfast, and, coming back with merry faces, were found to have been quietly married that day.

The money which Nicholas acquired in right of his wife he invested in the firm of Cheeryble Brothers, in which Frank had become a partner. Before many years elapsed, the business began to be carried on in the names of "Cheeryble and Nickleby," so that Mrs. Nickleby's prophetic anticipations were realized at last.

The twin brothers retired. Who needs to be told that *they* were happy? They were surrounded by happiness of their own creation, and lived but to increase it.

Tim Linkinwater condescended, after much entreaty and brow-beating, to accept a share in the house; but he could never be prevailed upon to suffer the publication of his name as a partner, and always persisted in the punctual and regular discharge of his clerkly duties.

He and his wife lived in the old house, and occupied the very bedchamber in which he had slept for four-and-forty years. As his wife grew older, she became even a more cheerful and light-hearted little creature; and it was a common saying among their friends, that it was impossible to say which looked the happier — Tim as he sat calmly smiling in his elbow-chair on one side of the fire, or his brisk little wife chatting and laughing, and constantly bustling in and out of hers, on the other.

Dick, the blackbird, was removed from the counting-house and promoted to a warm corner in the common sitting-room. Beneath his cage hung two miniatures, of Mrs. Linkinwater's execution; one representing herself, and the other Tim; and both smiling very hard at all beholders. Tim's head being powdered like a twelfth cake, and his spectacles copied with great nicety, strangers detected a close resemblance to him at the first glance, and this leading them to suspect that the other must be his wife, and emboldening them to say so without scruple, Mrs. Linkinwater grew very proud of these achievements in time, and considered them among the most successful likenesses she had ever painted. Tim had the profoundest faith in them, likewise; for on this, as on all other subjects, they held but one opinion; and if ever there were a "comfortable couple" in the world, it was Mr. and Mrs. Linkinwater.

Ralph, having died intestate, and having no relations but those with whom he had lived in such enmity, they would have become in legal course his heirs. But they could not bear the thought of growing rich on money so acquired, and felt as though they could never hope to prosper with it. They made no claim to his wealth; and the riches for which he had toiled all his days, and

burdened his soul with so many evil deeds, were swept at last into the coffers of the state, and no man was the better or the happier for them.

Arthur Gride was tried for the unlawful possession of the will, which he had either procured to be stolen, or had dishonestly acquired and retained by other means as bad. By dint of an ingenious counsel, and a legal flaw, he escaped; but only to undergo a worse punishment; for, some years afterwards, his house was broken open in the night by robbers, tempted by the rumors of his great wealth, and he was found murdered in his bed.

Mrs. Sliderskew went beyond the seas at nearly the same time as Mr. Squeers, and in the course of nature never returned. Brooker died penitent. Sir Mulberry Hawk lived abroad for some years, courted and caressed, and in high repute as a fine dashing fellow. Ultimately, returning to this country, he was thrown into jail for debt, and there perished miserably, as such high spirits generally do.

The first act of Nicholas, when he became a rich and prosperous merchant, was to buy his father's old house. As time crept on, and there came gradually about him a group of lovely children, it was altered and enlarged; but none of the old rooms were ever pulled down, no old tree was ever rooted up, nothing with which there was any association of bygone times was ever removed or changed.

Within a stone's throw, was another retreat, enlivened by children's pleasant voices too; and here was Kate, with many new cares and occupations, and many new faces courting her sweet smile (and one so like her own, that to her mother she seemed a child again), the same

true gentle creature, the same fond sister, the same in the love of all about her, as in her girlish days.

Mrs. Nickleby lived, sometimes with her daughter, and sometimes with her son, accompanying one or other of them to London at those periods when the cares of business obliged both families to reside there, and always preserving a great appearance of dignity, and relating her experiences (especially on points connected with the management and bringing-up of children) with much solemnity and importance. It was a very long time before she could be induced to receive Mrs. Linkinwater into favor, and it is even doubtful whether she ever thoroughly forgave her.

There was one gray-haired, quiet, harmless gentleman, who, winter and summer, lived in a little cottage hard by Nicholas's house, and, when he was not there, assumed the superintendence of affairs. His chief pleasure and delight was in the children, with whom he was a child himself, and master of the revels. The little people could do nothing without dear Newman Noggs.

The grass was green above the dead boy's grave, and trodden by feet so small and light, that not a daisy drooped its head beneath their pressure. Through all the spring and summer-time, garlands of fresh flowers, wreathed by infant hands, rested on the stone ; and, when the children came to change them lest they should wither and be pleasant to him no longer, their eyes filled with tears, and they spoke low and softly of their poor dead cousin.

THE END.

CAMBRIDGE: PRINTED BY H. O. HOUGHTON.

[illegible], Shears, Hussey
[illegible] Mill Pro. Co.

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY
3 1197 01052 7494

DATE DUE

FEB 1 8 1984
FEB 21 REC'D
MAR 6 1984
JUL 21 1988
JUL 19 1988
NOV 19 1988
AUG 24 1989
MAR 19 2012